

SUMMER
1945

PLANET STORIES

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ON OTHER WORLDS
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FUTURE CENTURIES

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FUTURE NOVELET OF
CONQUERED EARTH
WILBUR S. DEACOCK

The RED WITCH OF MERCURY

AMAZING NOVELET OF
THE FAR SPACEWAYS

EMMETT McDOWELL



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PLANET STORIES



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Red Witch of Mercury

By EMMETT McDOWELL

Death was Jaro Moynahan's stock in trade, and every planet had known his touch. But now, on Mercury, he was selling his guns into the weirdest of all his exploits—gambling his life against the soft touch of a woman's lips.

ON THE STAGE of Mercury Sam's Garden, a tight-frocked, limber-hipped, red-head was singing "*The Lady from Mars*." The song was a rollicking, ribald ditty, a favorite of the planters and miners, the space pilots and army officers who frequented the garden. The girl rendered it with such gusto that the audience burst into a roar of applause.

She bent her head in acknowledgment so that her bronze red hair fell down about her face. There was perspiration on her upper lip and temples. Her crimson mouth wore a fixed smile. Her eyes were frightened.

The man, who had accompanied the singer on the piano, sat at the foot of the

stage, his back to the crowded tables. He did not look up at the singer but kept his pale, immature face bent over the keys, while his fingers lightly, automatically picked out the tune. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck, plastered his white coat to his back. Without looking up, he said: "Have you spotted him?" His voice was pitched to reach the singer alone.

The girl, with an almost imperceptible gesture, shook her head.

The night was very hot; but then it is always hot on Mercury, the newest, the wildest, the hottest of Earth's frontiers. Fans spaced about the garden's walls sluggishly stirred the night air, while the men and women sitting at the tables drank heav-

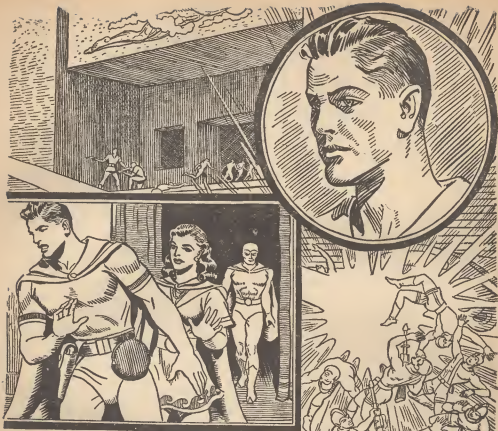


Illustration by DOOLIN

ily of Latonka, the pale green wine of Mercury. Only the native waiters, the enigmatic, yellow-eyed Mercurians, seemed unaffected by the heat. They didn't sweat at all.

Up on the stage the singer was about to begin another number when she stiffened.

"Here he is," she said to the pianist without moving her lips.

The pianist swung around on his stool, lifted his black eyes to the gate leading to the street.

Just within the entrance, a tall, thin man was standing. He looked like a gaunt gray wolf loitering in the doorway. His white duraloes suit hung faultlessly. His black hair was close-cropped, his nose thin and aquiline. For a moment he studied the crowded garden before making his way to a vacant table.

"Go on," said the pianist in a flat voice.

The red-head shivered. Stepping from the stage she picked her way through the tables until she came to the one occupied by the newcomer.

"May I join you?" she asked in a low voice.

The man arose. "Of course. I was expecting you. Here, sit down." He pulled out a chair, motioned for the waiter. The Mercurian, his yellow incurious eyes like two round topazes, sidled up. "Bring us a

bottle of Latonka from the Veederman region, well iced." The waiter slipped away.

"So," said the red-head; "you have come. I did not think you would be in time." Her hands were clenched in her lap. The knuckles were white.

The man said nothing.

"I did not want to call you in, Jaro Moynahan." It was the first time she had used his name. "You have the reputation of being unpredictable. I don't trust you, but since . . ."

SHE stopped as the waiter placed glasses on the table and deftly poured the pale green wine. The man, Jaro Moynahan, raised his glass.

"Here's to the revolution," he said. His low voice carried an odd, compelling note. His eyes, light blue and amused, were pale against his brown face.

The girl drew in her breath.

"No! Mercury is not ready for freedom. Only a handful of fanatics are engineering the revolution. The real Mercurian patriots are against it, but they are afraid to protest. You've got to believe me. The revolution is scheduled to break during the Festival of the Rains. If it does, the Terrestrials here will be massacred. The Mercurians hate them. We haven't but a handful of troops."

Jaro Moynahan wiped the sweat from his forehead with a fine duraweb handkerchief. "I had forgotten how abominably hot it can be here."

The girl ignored the interruption. "There is one man; he is the leader, the very soul of the revolution. The Mercurians worship him. They will do whatever he says. Without him they would be lost. He is the rebel, Karfial Hodes. I am to offer you ten thousand Earth notes to kill Karfial Hodes."

Jaro Moynahan refilled their empty glasses. He was a big man, handsome in a gaunt fashion. Only his eyes were different. They were flat and a trifle oblique with straight brows. The pupils were a pale and penetrating blue that could probe like a surgeon's knife. Now he caught the girl's eyes and held them with his own as a man spears a fish.

"Why call me all the way from Mars for that? Why not have that gunman at the piano rub Hodes out?"

The girl started, glanced at the pianist, said with a shiver: "We can't locate Karfial Hodes. Don't look at me that way, Jaro. You frighten me. I'm telling the truth. We can't find him. That's why we called you. You've got to find him, Jaro. He's stirring up all Mercury."

"Who's putting up the money?"

"I can't tell you."

"Ah," said Jaro Moynahan; "so that's the way it is."

"That's the way it is."

"There isn't much time," he said after a moment. "The Rains are due any day now."

"No," the girl replied. "But we think he's here in the city."

"Why? What makes you think that?"

"He was seen," she began, then stopped with a gasp.

The lights had gone out.

It was as unexpected as a shot in the back. One moment the garden was glowing in light, the next the hot black night swooped down on the revelers, pressing against their eyes like dark wool. The fans about the walls slowed audibly and stopped. It grew hotter, closer.

Jaro Moynahan slipped sideways from the table. He felt something brush his sleeve. Somewhere a girl giggled.

"What's coming off here?" growled a petulant male voice. Other voices took up the plaint.

Across the table from Jaro there was the feel of movement; he could sense it. An exclamation was suddenly choked off as if a hand had been clamped over the girl's mouth.

"Red!" said Jaro in a low voice.

There was no answer.

"Red!" he repeated, louder.

Unexpectedly, the deep, ringing voice of Mercury Sam boomed out from the stage.

"It's all right. The master fuse blew out. The lights will be on in a moment."

On the heels of his speech the lights flashed on, driving the night upward. The fans recommenced their monotonous whirling.

Jaro Moynahan glanced at the table. The red-headed singer was gone. So was the pianist.

Jaro Moynahan sat quietly back down and poured himself another glass of Latonka. The pale green wine had a deli-

cate yet exhilarating taste. It made him think of cool green grapes beaded with dew. On the hot, teeming planet of Mercury it was as refreshing as a cold plunge.

He wondered who was putting up the ten thousand Earth notes? Who stood to lose most in case of a revolution? The answer seemed obvious enough. Who, but Albert Peet. Peet controlled the Latonka trade for which there was a tremendous demand throughout the Universe.

And what had happened to the girl. Had the rebels abducted her. If so, he suspected that they had caught a tartar. The Red Witch had the reputation of being able to take care of herself.

He beckoned a waiter, paid his bill. As the Mercurian started to leave, a thought struck Jaro. These yellow-eyed Mercurians could see as well in the dark as any alley-prowling cat. For centuries they had lived most their lives beneath ground to escape the terrible rays of the sun. Only at night did they emerge to work their fields and ply their trades. He peeled off a bill, put it in the waiter's hands.

"What became of the red-headed singer?"

The Mercurian glanced at the bill, then back at the Earth man. There was no expression in his yellow eyes.

"She and the man, the queer white one who plays the piano, slipped out the gate to the street."

Jaro shrugged, dismissed the waiter. He had not expected to get much information from the waiter, but he was not a man to overlook any possibility. If the girl had been abducted, only Mercurians could have engineered it in the dark; and the Mercurians were a clannish lot.

Back on the narrow alley-like street Jaro Moynahan headed for his hostelry. By stretching out his arms he could touch the buildings on either side: buildings with walls four feet thick to keep out the heat of the sun. Beneath his feet, he knew, stretched a labyrinth of rooms and passages. Somewhere in those rat-runs was Karfial Hodes, the revolutionist, and the girl.

At infrequent intervals green globes cut a hole in the night, casting a faint illumination. He had just passed one of these futile street lamps when he thought he de-

tected a footfall behind him. It was only the whisper of a sound, but as he passed beyond the circle of radiation, he flattened himself in a doorway. Nothing stirred. There was no further sound. Again he started forward, but now he was conscious of shadows following him. They were never visible, but to his trained ears there came stealthy, revealing noises: the brush of cloth against the baked earth walls, the sly shuffle of a step. He ducked down a bisecting alley, faded into a doorway. Immediately all sounds of pursuit stopped. But as soon as he emerged he was conscious again of the followers. In the dense, humid night, he was like a blind man trying to elude the cat-eyed Mercurians.

In the East a sullen red glow stained the heavens like the reflection of a fire. The Mercurian dawn was about to break. With an oath, he set out again for his hostelry. He made no further effort to elude the followers.

ONCE BACK in his room, Jaro Moynahan stripped off his clothes, unbuckled a shoulder holster containing a compressed air slug gun, stepped under the shower. His body was lean and brown as his face and marked with innumerable scars. There were small round puckered scars and long thin ones, and his left shoulder bore the unmistakable brownish patch of a ray burn. Stepping out of the shower, he dried, rebuckled on the shoulder holster, slipped into pajamas. The pajamas were blue with wide gaudy stripes. Next he lit a cigarette and stretching out on the bed began to contemplate his toes with singular interest.

He had, he supposed, killed rather a lot of men. He had fought in the deadly little wars of the Moons of Jupiter for years, then the Universal Debacle of 3368, after that the Martian Revolution as well as dozens of skirmishes between the Federated Venusian States. No, there was little doubt but that he had killed quite a number of men. But this business of hunting a man through the rat-runs beneath the city was out of his line.

Furthermore, there was something phoney about the entire set up. The Mercurians, he knew, had been agitating for freedom for years. Why, at this time when the Earth Congress was about to grant them

self-government, should they stage a revolution?

A loud, authoritative rapping at the door interrupted further speculation. He swung his bare feet over the edge of the bed, stood up and ground out his cigarette. Before he could reach the door the rapping came again.

Throwing off the latch, he stepped back, balancing on the balls of his feet.

"Come in," he called.

The door swung open. A heavy set man entered, shut and locked the door, then glanced around casually. His eyes fastened on Jaro. He licked his lips.

"Mr. Moynahan, the—ah—professional soldier, I believe." His voice was high, almost feminine. "I'm Albert Peet." He held out a fat pink hand.

Jaro said nothing. He ignored the hand, waited, poised like a cat.

Mr. Peet licked his lips again. "I have come, Mr. Moynahan, on a matter of business, urgent business. I had not intended to appear in this matter. I preferred to remain behind the scenes, but the disappearance of Miss Mikail has—ah—forced my hand." He paused.

Jaro still said nothing. Miss Mikail must be the red-headed singer, whom at different times he had known under a dozen different aliases. He doubted that even she remembered her right name.

"Miss Mikail made you a proposition?" Albert Peet's voice was tight.

"Yes," said Jaro.

"You accepted?"

"Why, no. As it happened she was abducted before I had the chance."

Mr. Peet licked his lips. "But you will, surely you will. Unless Karfial Hodes is stopped immediately there will be a bloody uprising all over the planet during the Festival of the Rains. Earth doesn't realize the seriousness of the situation."

"Then I was right; it is you who are putting up the ten thousand Earth notes."

"Not entirely," said Peet uncomfortably. "There are many of us here, Mercurians as well as Earthmen, who recognize the danger. We have—ah—pooled our resources."

"But you stand to lose most in case of a successful revolution?"

"Perhaps. I have a large interest in the Latonka trade. It is—ah—lucrative."



Jaro Moynahan

JARO MOYNAHAN lit a cigarette, sat down on the edge of the bed. "Why beat about the bush," he asked with a sudden grin. "Mr Peet, you've gained control of the Latonka trade. Other Earthmen are in control of the mines and the northern plantations. Together you form perhaps the strongest combine the Universe has ever seen. You actually run Mercury, and you've squeezed out every possible penny. Every time self-government has come before the Earth Congress you've succeeded in blocking it. You are, perhaps, the most cordially-hated group anywhere. I don't wonder that you are afraid of a revolution."

Mr. Peet took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. "Fifteen thousand Earth notes I can offer you. But no more. That is as high as I can go."

Jaro laughed. "How did you know Red had been kidnapped?"

"We have a very efficient information system. I had the report of Miss Mikail's abduction fifteen minutes after the fact."

Jaro raised his eyebrows. "Perhaps then you know where she is?"

Mr. Peet shook his head. "No. Karfial Hodes' men abducted her."

A second rapping at the door caused them to exchange glances. Jaro went to the door, opened it. The pianist at the gardens was framed in the entrance. His

black eyes burned holes in his pale boyish face. His white suit was blotched with sweat and dirt.

"They told me Mr. Peet was here," he said.

"It's for you," said Jaro over his shoulder.

Mr. Peet came to the door. "Hello, Stanley. I thought Hodes had you? Where's Miss Mikail?"

"I got away. Look, Mr. Peet, I got to see you alone."

Albert Peet said, "Would you excuse me, Mr. Moynahan?" He licked his lips. "I'll just step out into the hall a moment." He went out, drawing the door shut after him.

Jaro lit a cigarette. He padded nervously back and forth across the room, his bare feet making no noise. He sat down on the edge of the bed. He got up and ground out the cigarette. He went to the door, but did not open it. Instead, he took another turn about the room. Again he came to a halt before the door, pressed his ear against the panel. For a long time he listened but could distinguish no murmur of voices. With an oath he threw open the door. The hall was empty.

II

JARO returned to his room, stripped off his pajamas, climbed back into his suit. He tested the slug gun. It was a flat, ugly weapon which hurled a slug the size of a quarter. He preferred it because, though he seldom shot to kill, it stopped a man like a well placed mule's hoof. He adjusted the gun lightly in its holster in order that it wouldn't stick if he were called upon to use it in a hurry. Then he went out into the hall.

At the desk he inquired if any messages had come for him. There were none, but the clerk had seen Mr. Peet with a young fellow take the incline to the underground. Above the clerk's head a newsograph was reeling off the current events almost as soon as they happened. Jaro read:

"Earth Congress suspends negotiations on Mercurian freedom pending investigation of rumored rebellion. Terrestrials advised to return to Earth. Karfial Hodes, Mercurian patriot, being sought."

Jaro descended the incline to the network of burrows which served as streets during the flaming days. Here in the basements and sub-basements were located the shops and dram houses where the Mercurians sat around little tables drinking silently of the pale green Latonka. The burrows were but poorly lit, the natives preferring the cool gloom, and Jaro had to feel his way, rubbing shoulders with the strange, silent populace. But when he reached the Terrestrial quarter of the city, bright radoxide lights took the place of the green globes, and there was a sprinkling of Colonial guards among the throng.

Jaro halted before a door bearing a placard which read:

"LATONKA TRUST"

He pushed through the door into a rich carpeted reception room. At the far end was a second door beside which sat a desk, door and desk being railed off from the rest of the office. The door into Albert Peet's inner sanctum was ajar. Jaro could distinguish voices; then quite clearly he heard Albert Peet say in a high girlish tone:

"Stanley, I thought I left you in the native quarter. Why did you follow me? How many times have I told you never to come here?"

The reply was unintelligible. Then the pale-faced young man came through the door shutting it after himself. At the sight of Jaro Moynahan he froze.

"What're you sneaking around here for?"

Jaro settled himself warily, his light blue eyes flicking over the youth.

"Let's get this straight," he said mildly. "I've known your kind before. Frankly, ever since I saw you I've had to repress a desire to step on you as I might a spider."

The youth's black eyes were hot as coals, his fingers twitching. His hands began to creep upward.

"You dirty . . ." he began, but he got no further. Jaro Moynahan shot him in the shoulder.

The compressed air slug gun had seemed to leap into Jaro's hand. The big slug, smacked the gunman's shoulder with a resounding thwack, hurled him against the wall. Jaro vaulted the rail, deftly relieved him of two poisoned needle guns.

"I'll get you for this," said Stanley, his mouth twisted in pain. "You've broken my shoulder. I'll kill you."

The door to the inner sanctum swung open.

"What's happened?" cried Albert Peet in distress. "What's wrong with you, Stanley?"

"This dirty slob shot me in the shoulder."

"But how badly?" Peet was wringing his hands.

"Nothing serious," said Jaro. "He'll have his arm in a sling for a while. That's all."

"Stanley," said Mr. Peet. "You're bleeding all over my carpet. Why can't you go in the washroom. There's a tile floor in there. If you hadn't disobeyed this wouldn't have happened. You and your fights. Has anyone called a doctor? Where's Miss Webb? Miss Webb! Oh, Miss Webb! That girl. Miss Webb!"

STANLEY climbed to his feet, swayed a moment drunkenly, then wobbled out a door on the left just as a tall brunette hurried in from the right. She had straight black hair which hung not quite to her shoulders, and dark brown eyes, and enough of everything else to absorb Jaro's attention.

"Oh!" exclaimed Miss Webb as she caught sight of the blood staining the carpet.

"There's been an—ah—accident," said Mr. Peet, and he licked his lips. "Call a doctor, Miss Webb."

Miss Webb raised an eyebrow, went to the visoscreen. In a moment she had tuned in the prim starched figure of a nurse seated at a desk.

"Could Dr. Baer rush right over here? There's been an accident."

"Rush over where?" said the girl in the visoscreen. "These gadgets aren't telepathic, honey."

"Oh," said Miss Webb, "the offices of the Latonka Trust."

The girl in the visoscreen thawed like ice cream in the sun. "I'm sure Dr. Baer can come. He'll be there in a moment."

"Thank you," said Miss Webb. She flicked the machine off, then added: "You trollop."

Mr. Peet regarded Jaro Moynahan with distress.

"Really, Mr. Moynahan, was it necessary to shoot Stanley? Isn't that—ah—a little extreme? I'm afraid it might incapacitate him, and I had a job for him."

"Oh," cried Miss Webb, her brown eyes crackling. "Did you shoot that poor boy? Aren't you the big brave man?"

"Poor boy?" said Jaro mildly. "Venemous little rattlesnake. I took these toys away from him." He held out the poisoned dart guns. "You take them, Mr. Peet. Frankly, they give me the creeps. They might go off. A scratch from one of those needles would be enough."

Mr. Peet accepted the guns gingerly. He held them as if they might explode any minute. He started to put them in his pocket, thought better of it, glanced around helplessly.

"Here, Miss Webb," he said, "do something with these. Put them in my desk."

Miss Webb's eyes grew round as marbles. "I wouldn't touch one of those nasty little contraptions for all the Latonka on Mercury."

"Here, I'll take them," said Stanley coming back into the room. He had stunched the flow of blood. His face was even whiter, if possible. Jaro eyed him coldly as with his good hand the youth dropped the dart guns back into their holsters.

"Act like you want to use those and I'll put a slug in your head next time."

"Now, Mr. Moynahan." Mr. Peet licked his lips nervously. "Stanley, go into my office. The doctor will be here in a moment. Miss Webb, you may go home. I'll have no more work for you today."

ALBERT PEET led Stanley through the door. Jaro and Miss Webb were alone. With his eye on the door, Jaro said:

"When you go out, turn left toward the native quarter. Wait for me in the first grog shop you come to."

Miss Webb raised her eyebrows. "What's this? A new technique?"

"Look," began Jaro annoyed.

"My eyes are practically popping out of my head now," she interrupted. "Another morning like this and I take the first space liner back to Earth." She jammed her hat on backward, snatched her bag from the desk drawer.

"I'm not trying to pick you up. This is . . ."

"How disappointing."

Jaro began again patiently. "Wait for me in the first grog shop. There's something I must know. It's important." He cleared his throat. "Don't you find the heat rather uncomfortable, Miss Webb. But perhaps you've become accustomed to it."

Mr. Peet came back into the room.

"Why, no, I mean yes," replied Miss Webb, a blank expression in her eyes.

"Goodbye, Miss Webb," said Mr. Peet firmly.

Jaro grinned and winked at her. Miss Webb tottered out of the room.

As the door closed behind the girl, Albert Peet licked his lips, said: "Mr. Moynahan, I suppose my disappearance back at your room requires some explanation. But the fact is that Stanley brought an important bit of news." He paused.

Jaro said nothing.

"You might be interested to know that Miss Mikail is quite safe. Karfial Hodes has her, but Stanley assures me she will be quite safe." Again he paused. As Jaro remained silent, his neck mottled up pinkly.

"The fact is, Mr. Moynahan, that we won't need you after all. I realize that we've put you to considerable trouble and we're prepared to pay you whatever you believe your time is worth. Say five hundred Earth notes?"

"That's fair enough," replied Jaro.

Albert Peet sighed. "I have the check made out."

"Only," continued Jaro coldly, "I'm not ready to be bought off. I think I'll deal myself a hand in this game."

Mr. Peet's face fell. "You won't reconsider?"

"Sorry," said Jaro; "but I've got a date. I'm late now." He started to leave.

"Stanley!" called Albert Peet.

The pale faced young man appeared in the doorway, the dart gun in his good hand. Jaro Moynahan dropped on his face, jerking out his slug gun as he fell. There was a tiny plop like a cap exploding. He heard the whisper of the poisoned dart as it passed overhead. Then he fired from the floor. The pale-faced young man crumpled like an empty sack.

Jaro got up, keeping an eye on Albert Peet, brushed off his knees.

"You've killed him," said Peet. "If I

were you, Mr. Moynahan, I would be on the next liner back to Earth."

Without answering, Jaro backed watchfully from the room.

ONCE Jaro Moynahan had regained the street, he mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. Whatever was going on, these boys played for keeps. Warily he started down the passage toward the native quarter. At the first basement grog shop he turned in. His eyes swept the chamber, then he grinned.

At a corner table, a tall glass of Latonka before her, sat Miss Webb. Her hat was still on backwards, and she was perched on the edge of her chair as if ready to spring up and away like a startled faun.

"Bang!" said Jaro coming up behind her and poking a long brown finger in the small of her back.

Miss Webb uttered a shriek, jerked so violently that her hat tilted over one eye. She regarded him balefully from beneath the brim.

"Never a dull moment," she gritted.

Still grinning, Jaro sat down. "I'm Jaro Moynahan, Miss Webb. I think Albert Peet forgot to introduce us. There's some skulduggery going on here that I'm particularly anxious to get to the bottom of. I thought you might be able to help me."

"Yes," replied Miss Webb sweetly.

A native waiter, attracted no doubt by her scream, came over and took Jaro's order.

"All right," Jaro smiled, but his pale blue eyes probed the girl thoughtfully. "I'll have to confide certain facts which might be dangerous for you to know. Are you game, Miss Webb?"

"Since we're going to be so chummy," she replied; "you might begin by calling me Joan. You make me feel downright ancient."

"Well then," he said. "In the first place, I just killed that baby-faced gunman your boss had in his office."

"Awk!" said Joan, choking on the Latonka.

"It was self-defense," he hastened to assure her. "He took a pot shot at me with that poisoned dart gun."

"But the police!" she cried, as she caught her breath.

"There'll never be an investigation. Al-

bert Peet will see to that. I was called here on what I supposed was a legitimate revolution. Instead I was offered ten thousand Earth notes to assassinate the leader of the revolution.

"What revolution? I'm going around in circles."

"The Mercurians, of course."

"I don't believe it," said the girl. "The Mercurians are the most peaceable people in the Universe. They've been agitating for freedom, yes. But they believe in passive resistance. I don't believe you could induce a Mercurian to kill, even in self-protection. That's why Albert Peet and the rest of the combine had such an easy time gaining control of the Latonka trade."

"Score one," breathed Jaro, "I begin to see light. Miss Webb—ah, Joan—I've a notion that we're going to be a great team. How do you happen to be Albert Peet's private secretary?"

"A gal's gotta eat. But the truth is, I was quitting. The Latonka Trust is almost on the rocks. Their stock has been dropping like a meteor."

Jaro Moynahan raised his oblique brows but did not interrupt.

"Albert Peet," she continued, has been trying to sell out but nobody will touch the stock, not since it looks as if the Earth Congress is going to grant the Mercurians their freedom. Everybody knows that the first thing the Mercurians will do, will be to boot out the Latonka Trust."

"What about this Karfial Hodes?" said Jaro. "I've heard that he's inciting the Mercurians to rebellion. The newscaster had a line about the revolution too. The government has advised all Terrestrials to return to Earth."

"It's not true," Joan flared. "It's all a pack of lies invented by the Latonka Trust. I know."

"But I should think rumors like that would run down the Latonka stock."

JOAN shook her head. "It doesn't add up, I know. But Karfial Hodes is a real patriot. He wouldn't advocate a bloody revolution. That's not his way."

They both sipped their wine. Joan's eyes were narrowed thoughtfully but Jaro's features were impassive.

"Well," he said at last, "I wouldn't give

a Venusian kapek for Karfial Hodes' life right now."

"Why?"

Jaro shrugged. "They wanted me to find him and kill him. Stanley, that little rattlesnake, is captured by Hodes' men and escapes, then Albert Peet doesn't need me anymore. What would you say?"

The girl's eyes widened. "They know where he is?"

"Exactly."

"But he's such a gentle old man. Surely they wouldn't murder him."

Jaro said nothing. He sat facing the entrance. From time to time he flicked his eyes to the girl's face but for the most part, he watched the doorway like a cat at a mouse hole. For some minutes past he had been unobtrusively studying a plump, bald-headed man who had entered and was loitering about the door. The plump man's hand disappeared inside the breast of his gray coat. When it reappeared there was the glint of metal in his fist.

Without a word of warning, Jaro seized the edge of the table, upended it with a crash of glass. In the same movement, he slipped to the floor, using the table as a shield. Joan was left sitting in her chair, a foolish expression on her face.

"For heaven's sake," she hissed, "get up! Everybody's staring at us."

Jaro shifted the slug gun to his left hand, grabbed the girl by one shapely ankle, yanked her to the floor.

"Oof!" she gulped as she lit with a solid smack. Her hat slid to the back of her head.

"Stay down!" said Jaro impassively.

The plump man in the gray suit was circling the table warily. Jaro took a pot shot at him over the top of the table. The plump man spun around as if jerked by an unseen hand. The occupants of the other tables simultaneously dived for the door which was at least ten feet too narrow to accommodate them all. The plump man was sitting on the floor, his back to the wall, a surprised expression on his face. His poisoned dart gun lay a dozen feet away.

"Come on," said Jaro yanking the girl to her feet as abruptly as he had tumbled her down. "This joint should have a back exit."

Joan clapped her hand to her hat as they

dashed around the bar and through a door. They came out into a narrow, devious alley which paralleled the main passage.

"What happened?" Joan gasped when she caught her breath.

Jaro slipped the slug gun back in its holster. "Give me a slug gun any day. It's got a kick like a rocket tube. When you hit a man with it, he says down. Knocked that gunman right off his feet. Did you see him?"

"No," said Joan bitterly. "I'm not accustomed to being thumped around like a sack of flour. I didn't see anything, after bouncing off the floor, but stars."

"One of Peet's men tailed me into the grog shop," he explained, "and took a shot at us."

"Us?" she gulped. "But why?"

"We know too much."

They had emerged into a well-lit, well-traveled passage. Jaro looked at the girl seriously, his light blue eyes unreadable. "What can I do with you?"

"Must you do anything? I'm really a very frail girl. You play too rough."

He ignored the interruption. "You'd better come to my room." He took her arm, started off toward the native quarter.

"Please, Mr. Moynahan," she protested trotting along beside him.

"Now, listen," said Jaro patiently. "I didn't kill that gunman. When he lets Peet know that we were together your life won't be worth anymore than Karfiel Hodes'."

"Oh," said Miss Webb. Then increasing her pace she repeated with rising inflection: "Oh! Well let's not loiter along like this. Let's get there!"

III

AT HIS ROOM, Jaro locked the door under the girl's suspicious eyes.

"If I were to listen to my better judgment," she remarked dryly, "I would leap out the window right now."

"And probably get sunstroke before you hit the street," he supplemented. "I'm hungry enough to eat a cow, hoofs, horns, and tail." He went to the telescreen and ordered dinners to be brought to the room.

"Am I going to spend the rest of my life here?" she asked.

"Heaven forbid."

Joan stood in the middle of the floor like a skater on thin ice. Jaro went over to the bed, sat down, lit a cigarette. He flipped the match out the window.

"Sit down," he said abruptly. "Unless, of course, you can rest on your feet like a horse."

Joan sank primly into a chair across from the bed. "What are we going to do?"

He shrugged. "We're in a spot. Albert Peet probably has another gunman after us by this time. We might have lost his men when we ducked out the back of that bar, but I doubt it. He has a very efficient spy system. Karfiel Hodes' men have been tailing me since last night. Actually Miss Webb—uh—Joan—we're in a state of siege. There's something big afoot. So big they can't afford to let us escape."

Joan gulped, her eyes big as saucers. "But what do we know?"

"Well," he replied seriously; "we know first that Peet is hiring a bunch of gunmen to rub out Karfiel Hodes—and incidentally, us."

"Us? What's incidental about that?" Joan interrupted vigorously. "Maybe you consider having gunmen take a pot shot at you incidental, but as far as I'm concerned it's the nub of the whole nasty business."

Jaro ignored the interruption. "Furthermore, we know that the Latonka Trust is almost on the rocks because the Earth Congress is about to grant the Mercurians their freedom. And this time Albert Peet and his combine haven't been able to block it. Not yet anyway."

"Don't forget the revolution," said Joan.

"I'm not. A revolution would burst open the Latonka Trust like a ripe watermelon. Peet would be lucky if he got away with his pants. But . . ."

A discreet knocking at the door interrupted him. Miss Webb clapped her hand to her mouth as if to stifle a scream.

"Don't open it," she hissed loud enough to be heard on the next floor.

Jaro drew his slug gun, threw off the latch, then with a swift cat-like movement yanked open the door.

Just outside stood a serving wagon loaded with food. The native waiter looked up, startled at the sudden opening of the door, and found himself staring down the barrel of Jaro's slug gun. His yellow eyes

popped out like agates and he almost completed a back somersault.

"Bring it in," said Jaro sheathing the gun.

With a reproachful glance the waiter set the dishes on the table and retreated hastily. The serving wagon took the curve into the hall on two wheels.

Suppressed giggles rocked Joan's body. "Oh, if you could have seen yourself." She burst out laughing. "The mother bird defending its young." She rocked back and forth in the chair.

"You'd better come eat," said Jaro stiffly, "before the food gets cold."

Joan stifled her laughter, wiped the tears out of her eyes, pulled up a chair.

"I'M NOT a bit hungry," she protested; "but what a lovely steak." She attacked it with vigor. "Um, um," she said between mouthfuls. "Delicious." There were half a dozen other dishes. Her strong white teeth wrought havoc with their contents. Jaro, a light eater, picked at a salad, but for the most part he watched the girl with growing interest. From time to time she cast covetous glances at his steak which he had pushed aside.

"If you're not going to eat your steak," she ventured hesitantly.

Jaro pushed it across the table. "For a girl who wasn't a bit hungry," he said; "you've shown remarkable staying powers. What do you do? Store it up in case of famine?"

"Really," said Joan polishing off Jaro's steak; "you embarrass me."

Just then a loud knock at the door caused her to gulp the last of it unchewed.

"What is this?" she asked, "the cross-roads of Mercury? You certainly entertain a lot."

Jaro drew his slug gun again, tiptoed to the door, pulled it open. A big blond young man was leaning against the door frame. He was a good six feet, three inches tall and his shoulders almost filled the entrance. He had light blue eyes, a short straight nose. The rest of his face wore a broad grin.

"Hello, Jaro, you old butcher," said the big young man. "Quit tickling my nose with that slug gun and invite me in."

Joan tittered as Jaro holstered the gun. The big young man caught sight of her

for the first time. He looked quickly away.

"Sorry, old man," he said in a low voice. "didn't know you had company. No end sorry. Meet me tonight at *Mercury Sam's Garden*."

Jaro's face broke into a grin.

"Come in," he said. "It's much worse than it looks." He turned to Joan. "Miss Webb, this is Irving Landovitch. He's with the Terrestrial Intelligence Service; so naturally he has a suspicious mind."

Joan blushed hotly. "Oh," she said. "How do you do?"

The T.I.S. agent acknowledged the introduction, sat down on the bed.

"What are you doing here, Irving?" asked Jaro. "The last time I saw you, you were working on a smuggling case back on Earth."

"That's what I should ask you," replied the big young man, "but I don't mind telling you Jaro, I'm investigating a report that a revolution is about to break here on Mercury. Frankly, we didn't put much credence in it until we learned that you'd landed."

"How did you find me?"

"Oh that," chuckled the T.I.S. agent. "We've had a man shadowing you ever since you hit the space port."

For the first time Jaro exhibited annoyance. "First Hodes' men, then Albert Peet's men and now the T.I.S. I knew



Landovitch

was being tailed, but I didn't realize I was leading a parade."

The T.I.S. agent glanced at Joan. "No offense, Miss Webb, but could I see Mr. Moynahan alone? It won't take but a moment."

She glanced helplessly at Jaro. "Where shall I go?"

JARO GRINNED. "You might step in the shower, pull the curtain around you and turn on the water."

The big young man looked perplexed. "Couldn't we join her in the dining room in a few moments?"

"No," expostulated Jaro. "I should say not. She just ate enough to last a Mercurian family a week. If I turned her loose down with all that food she'd probably founder herself. Besides Albert Peet's gunmen would like nothing better than to catch her alone. No, Irving, you'll have to talk in front of her."

"I don't like it," replied Landovitch. He shook his head full-like from side to side. "But, well Jaro, how are you mixed up in this?"

Jaro hitched his chair closer. "Listen, I was at Valego, organizing the Martian army. The prince had commissioned me."

"We know all about your disreputable past," Landovitch interrupted blandly.

"Quit heckling him," said Joan. "For all I've been able to gather he was born yesterday. He's the most uncommunicative man ever."

Irving Landovitch clucked sympathetically. "Jaro, how did you impose on this poor innocent child. If you'd let me know, maybe I could, too."

"I was on Mars," Jaro continued patiently, "when I got a flash from the Red Witch—she's using the name of Mikail—to grab the first spaceship for Mercury. She said she was singing at *Mercury Sam's Garden*." In as few words as possible he sketched his adventures since arriving. Landovitch whistled.

"The Rains are three days overdue," he said.

"What is the Festival like?" asked Jaro. "I've heard something about it, but I've never been here during the Rains."

The T.I.S. agent rolled his eyes. "It would make a Roman orgy look like a Sunday School picnic. Ordinarily the Mer-

curians are the meekest people in the Universe, but during the Rains, they go a little crazy."

"A little?" said Joan. "They're mad as hatters." She paused, her expression undergoing an abrupt change. "Listen!"

At first they could distinguish nothing, then from outside the window came a persistent sigh which gradually deepened into a full-throated roar.

"The Rains," breathed Joan with a catch in her throat. "In a moment we will hear the flutes."

OUT in the hall someone knocked on the door.

"Third time's the charm," said Jaro, and drew the slug gun.

Landovitch said: "He won't be expecting me. When he shoots you I ought to be able to catch him by surprise."

"Maybe I should allow you to answer the door."

"Go on," Landovitch waved his gun. "I'm right behind you, but out of the line of fire, of course."

Jaro threw open the door. Both men thrust their guns in the face of the little Mercurian waiter who had served the food.

"I'm growing accustomed," the waiter said; "to your peculiar sense of humor." He marched between the two big men, closed and locked the heavy storm shutters, marched back out. Joan burst into peals of laughter. Jaro and Landovitch sheepishly returned their guns to their holsters.

"Will you quit laughing like a hyena," said Jaro, "I think I hear something."

Joan subsided into giggles. From beneath their feet came a thin minor melody. It possessed a maddening undercurrent indescribable in its effect. Other instruments joined the first until the sound was like a field of katydids.

"The flutes," said Joan. "It's the flutes."

Jaro, listening to their reedy melody, thought of the pipes of Pan. He allowed his pale blue eyes to examine Joan Webb. She had long legs, hips that were full, rounded, but not too broad, a slim waist, high breasts. He took a long drink of Latonka. He said, "I want to revel."

Landovitch said with admiration in his voice, "You sure can pick 'em, Jaro."

She glanced in alarm from Jaro to Landovitch. "Don't get any ideas, you two

predatory wolves, you. I absolutely refuse to be a party to any orgies."

"Tell me," said Jaro, "what is this Festival of the Rains? What does it symbolize?"

Joan explained: "It celebrates the marriage of Nemi, the god of the rain, with the soil. Each year Nemi takes a new bride. She's chosen from the prettiest girls of Acecia. She symbolizes the earth. The last night of the festival, she is led into a beautiful chamber deep in the lower levels of the rain god's temple and placed in bed and left. Nemi, himself, is—ah—er, supposed to visit her during the night. For a whole year she must remain faithful to Nemi. The people actually believe her a goddess. But at the end of that time Nemi divorces her, and she is relegated to the Temple Priestesses. The Temple Priestesses," she added dryly, "aren't noted for their rigidity of morals."

They all took a drink of Latonka. The flutes were louder, more insistent in their suggestion. Landovitch twitched his blond scalp pensively. He did it like a horse twitches a patch of hide. Joan stared at him fascinated. She said, "How did you do that?" She wrinkled her nose, frowned, trying to imitate his feat.

"Gimme that jug," said Jaro. He turned to Joan. "We," he said impressively, "are the revolution." Joan realized that the two men had consumed considerable wine. Landovitch threw wide his arms. "Comarade!" he shouted. There were tears in his eyes.

Jaro put down the jug empty. "Comarade!" he cried. They embraced.

Joan watched them, her brown eyes round as saucers. Jaro turned to Joan. "Comarade!" he said. He embraced her.



She said, "Comarade" in a weak voice. He continued to embrace her. Landovitch lost interest in the revolution. He was searching for another jug. With a chortle, he dragged one forth from beneath the bed.

He observed Jaro and Joan with a lifted eyebrow. "Such brazenness," he said in a reproving voice; "and right before my eyes, too."

"Oh!" exploded Joan angrily. She pushed Jaro away. "Of all the disgusting tricks!" she said. "This isn't any time for clowning."

"I think," said Jaro Moynahan, "our best plan is to locate Karfial Hodes. I have an idea that he is the key to this mess."

Landovitch said, "Lead on, Moynahan. Your faithful friend, Last Ditch Landovitch, is with you." He waved the jug. "Comarade," he said.

"Comarade," said Jaro. They opened their arms. They embraced like two football tackles. Jaro turned to Joan, "Comarade," he said.

"No you don't!" said Joan grimly. "I've been 'cameraded' the last time." Jaro's arms encircled her like bands of steel. She had never imagined such strength. "Oh well," she said, "comarade."

Landovitch opened the door. The music of the flutes swept into the room. Jaro and Landovitch linked their arms in Joan's. She was not a small girl, but she appeared fragile and doll-like between the two big men. The T.I.S. agent twirled the two gallon jug of Latonka on his finger. They paraded into the hall, down the stairs, three abreast.

Jaro saw with surprise that the lobby was deserted. The clerk seemed nervous, irritable, anxious to join the revelry which assailed their ears from the runs.

Joan suddenly went, "Awk."

Landovitch, under the impression that she was choking, thumped her on the back.

"For God's sake!" said Joan. "Stop it before you jar my teeth loose."

"Yeah! Stop it," Jaro said.

Landovitch desisted,

"I thought," said Joan; "that Albert Peet's men were trying to kill us?"

"They are," said Jaro.

Joan started back toward the steps.

"Then I'm going to lock myself in your room," she said.

Jaro grabbed her arm.

Landovitch said, "We'll take care of Peet's men."

"Give me a drink of that dutch courage," said Joan, taking the Latonka jug. She took a long drink. They all took a long drink. They descended into the runs.

IV

AT ONCE they were engulfed in a concourse of Mercurians. Jaro stared about him in amazement. The narrow dim-lit way was jammed with revelers. The women wore the historic costume, a short skirt low on bare hips and a diminutive jacket with squared sleeves. Their black hair was done up on top of their heads with blossoms of the red egalet that only blooms during the Rains. Wooden clogs were fastened to their feet. The men wore gaudy, loose trousers and cummerbunds of green. Their chests were bare, and many bands of hammered silver ornamented their arms.

The three revolutionists wriggled their way into a grog shop. They were served wine and thin strips of cheese with some strange, hexagonal crackers.

"Why can't I get assignments like this often?" bewailed Landovitch.

"Don't look now," said Joan, "but a man's following us."

Jaro lit a cigarette, allowed his eyes to scrutinize the room. A short, fat Earthman lounged at the door. The waiter offered him a glass of Latonka which he refused. He had a hat perched on the back of his head. He wore a white coat but no shirt. A second Earthman pushed through the door. The fat man raised an eyebrow, nodded imperceptibly toward Jaro. The second man took a seat at a table to their left. Jaro's eyes flitted about the room. On the other side two men sipped Latonka. They were Venusians. Tall, lean, yellow skinned men, they reminded him of Manchus. Each, he noticed with a start, had a pale blue star about the size of a dime tattooed on his forehead. Fazoqls! The caste of professional killers! His experience during the wars among the Federated Venusian States had given him a great respect for the Fazoql's cast. They were



men without fear. He nudged Landovitch.

"We're in a trap," he smiled, sipped his wine. He looked as if he were passing the time of day. He said, "Joan get between us. Saunter toward the door."

Two more Earth men squeezed inside. The fat man nodded his head. The two Venusian Fazoqls pushed back from the table.

The fat man intercepted them. "Where you going?" he asked with a smile.

Jaro hit him in the mouth. Landovitch kicked someone in the stomach; shot one of the Fazoqls, clouted a third ruffian over the head. Jaro was grateful that Landovitch was with him. The big T.I.S. agent in action combined the destructive ability of an octopus and a tornado. They dived for the door. Then Jaro saw Landovitch topple over.

The second Fazoql had walloped him over the head with the leg of a chair. The lights went out. Joan screamed. Jaro felt her hand torn from his arm. He thought, "Mercurians!"

Something hit him over the head.

AFTER a while Jaro came to. He stood up, bumped his head against the ceiling. It was dark. He felt about with his hands. He seemed to be in a cubical cell about four feet square and not much higher. He could neither stand up nor lie down. It was so deep beneath the city, he couldn't hear the flutes. His head ached. The walls, floor, and ceiling of the cell, he discovered by the sense of touch, were stone. He sat down, his back to the wall. He wondered dully what had happened to Landovitch and Joan. Did Albert Peet or Karfial Hodes have the girl?

He thought ruefully that Peet probably

had her. The presence of the Earthmen and the two Venusian Fazoqls convinced him that Peet was behind the attack. Then he too must be a prisoner of Peet. He was faintly surprised that he hadn't been killed.

He closed his eyes to shut out the absolute darkness which pressed in on him from all sides. With a touch of panic he considered the possibility that he might be blind. He shuddered, refusing to think about it, speculating on the fine collection of rogues which Albert Peet had gathered in support of his collapsing economic empire.

He was not surprised that the Latonka Czar had hired the Fazoqls. The caste of Venusian killers were active all over the Universe. Like the Greek mercenaries of ancient times, it was a respected profession on Venus. As long as Peet fulfilled his side of the contract, the Fazoqls would be loyal. But the Earthmen!

Earthmen gone bad were more feared than mad dogs and given a much wider berth. They were just as apt to destroy Albert Peet as his enemies. When he thought of Joan Webb being left to their tender care, he writhed mentally.

There was something fresh, likeable, wholesome about the girl. He made no melodramatic vows of revenge to himself should he discover that the girl had been harmed. Instead a coldness crept over his mind. He would, he knew, hunt them to the outermost ports of the Universe's far-flung frontiers.

His head was no better. He felt that a drink of Latonka would clear his mind. After a while he went back to sleep.

When he awoke he was very thirsty. He set about exploring his cell with his fingers, encountered a jug and a pan of food. They must have been placed there while he slept. He ate and drank. His head didn't ache so badly, his mind was clearer. He felt his chin. He thought he would like a bath and a shave.

He shifted position, leaned back against the wall, felt it give slightly beneath his weight. He scrambled around, feverishly ran his hand over the smooth blocks of stone. One of the blocks, he discovered, had been pushed back in the wall about an inch. He shoved outward against it. The stone receded further, leaving a hole

scarcely large enough for his broad shoulders.

Jaro squeezed into the hole, wriggled forward, pushing the stone ahead of him. It ran in grooves. This was not the regular door he felt sure, but a secret entrance of whose existence he doubted that even his guards suspected. After about four feet, he felt himself clear of the wall. The stone came to a stop. He could push it no further. He had come through into a second chamber or passage, he didn't know which as still no glimmer of light relieved the intense darkness.

HE STOOD, cracked his head against the ceiling. He recalled the small stature of the Mercurians, grinned ruefully.

He bethought himself of his captors' surprise when they discovered his escape, got back down on hands and knees, pushed the stone back into the exit. It came to a stop with a small click. The hole was plugged. He tried to move the stone. It was latched fast. He realized that the lock must not have been caught or else no amount of pressure would have moved that stone. Backing out into the passage behind the cells, he stood up again. He was free.

Stooping painfully he crept along the wall. He had taken five hundred and twenty-three steps when he stumbled up a stair. Recovering his balance, he climbed up sixteen steps which wound back on themselves, came out in another passage. This second corridor he judged ran directly above the one he had just left. There was still no light. With increasing confidence he began its exploration.

The first thing his groping fingers encountered was a narrow alcove inset in the wall. Like a blind man he passed his hand across the back wall of the alcove, felt a knob-like protuberance, pulled. A small stone plug came out, revealing a peep hole. A ray of light streamed through the aperture. He wasn't blind!

He put his eye to the peep hole, saw a large, delicately furnished room. In the center was a bed on a dais. Several luxurious chairs, fashioned like chaise longues and upholstered in white fur, squatted invitingly about the floor. A deep-piled aquamarine carpet covered the cold stone

blocks under foot. The walls were a solid mass of bas relief. The ancient sculptor had exhibited a robust sense of realism in his choice of subjects.

He felt about the walls, sure that there must be some means of ingress. His fingers discovered a second handle. He pulled. A section of the wall swung back.

For a moment he hesitated like a gray wolf coming into a clearing, then crossed the chamber to the door. Cautiously, he inched it open. A long corridor met his eyes. It was lighted like the chamber with the pale green globes of the Mercurians. Like the chamber too, it was deserted.

He stepped back in the room, drew the door shut, bolted it. With growing curiosity he set about examining his surroundings. If this belonged to Albert Peet's establishment, he surely did himself proud. He discovered a closet full of rich feminine apparel, then a second door leading through a mirror paneled dressing room into a bath with a sunken tub.

Jaro sighed. He stripped off his clothes, filled the tub, let himself into the warm water. Having bathed he searched a small built-in cabinet, found a hair remover used by the Mercurian women on their legs. It doubled for a razor quite successfully. He ran his hand over his chin, laughed, returned to the main chamber. Unlocking the door to the hall in order not to create suspicion, he retreated into the secret passage, shut the door, plugged the peep hole.

A dozen steps further along the corridor, he found a second alcove identical with the last. There was a corresponding peep hole. The room he looked into resembled the other except that its appointments differed. It too, was deserted. He thought everyone must be above celebrating the Festival. He wondered where he was. The last two chambers had held no clue.

A third alcove revealed a room similar to the others except that it was occupied. A pale Mercurian girl was asleep on the bed. Her black hair lay on her white shoulders like stains of ink. A broad band of green metal encircled one naked ankle.

Jaro drew in his breath sharply. A temple priestess, one of the ex-brides of Nemi. He was beneath the temple of the rain god. Albert Peet's men had not captured him after all. The thought induced a new

chain of reasoning. He remembered the lights flashing out back in the grog shop. His thought at the time: "Mercurians." It dawned on him that Karfial Hodes' men must have rescued them from Peet's hired Mercenaries. But why? He put the plug back into place.

The following two chambers were empty. At first, he thought the next one was too. He was about to insert the plug when a girl entered from the dressing room. His lips formed an inaudible whistle. The girl was Joan Webb



Joan Webb

JARO, observing Joan Webb through the peep hole, saw that her tawny brown eyes were strained, frightened, her shorts and blouse rumpled as if slept in. He wondered suddenly how much time had elapsed since the fight in the grog shop.

Joan turned and went back into the dressing room. Jaro, with a broad grin, found the handle, swung back the secret panel. He squeezed through the narrow aperture, drew shut the panel behind him.

Joan came back into the room.

He said: "Hail, fairest of all maidens. I am Nemi come for my bride."

Joan screamed, sprang back into the dressing room, peered at him wildly around the edge of the frame.

"You!" she said. She came out. "Where did you come from?"

Jaro bounced up and down on the edge of the bed. "How did you rate this?" he asked. "You should have seen my cell. You've been imprisoned in the lap of luxury."

Joan repeated, "Where did you come from?"

He waved his hand airily. "Out of the nowhere into the here."

She observed him dubiously, said, "Listen Nemi, if you can get in and out as you please, let's not loiter."

He grinned, led her to the secret entrance, pushed back the panel.

"Oh!" said Joan. "You almost had me believing that Nemi stuff."

"Come on." He squeezed through the exit, disappeared.

Joan hesitated, peering with alarm into the black hole. "The way I have to trust you!"

Jaro reached out a hand, pulled her through, pushed the panel in place. They were immediately in darkness so thick, so dense that they could feel it.

"Where are you?" said Joan, a panicky note in her voice.

"Here," Jaro laughed.

"Oh!" she ejaculated. "Really, Mr. Moynahan."

"What happened back in the grog shop?"

Joan hesitated, said, "It's all kind of foggy. I was simply petrified with fright. When the lights went out, someone grabbed me. I tried to cry out for you only someone had his hand over my mouth. I couldn't do anything but gurgle. They dragged me toward the back of the shop. I thought . . . Well, never mind what I thought."

Jaro chuckled.

"It wasn't funny," said Joan, indignant. "They hauled me down some stairs, into an alley. I saw then that they were Mercurians, and I wasn't so scared. They brought me here, and here I've been ever since. But I still don't understand how you found me."

He said, "There seems to be a regular network of these secret passages running through the walls. It was the merest ac-

cident that I stumbled into them. Where they lead, though, I don't know any more than you."

"What are we going to do?" she wanted to know.

"Find Karfiel Hodes. I've a hunch that he's hidden here."

"I was afraid of that," she said in a plaintive tone.

Jaro found her hand, led her to the next alcove, applied his eye to the peep hole. The room, he saw, was identical with the one in which Joan had been imprisoned. On the bed lay the red-headed singer of *Mercury Sam's Garden*.

"The Red Witch," he whispered. "We're getting hot."

"Who's she?" said Joan. She pushed Jaro aside, put her eye to the peep hole. "Where do you meet these people?" she asked.

Jaro said, "I'm going in and talk to her. Wait here."

"What?" cried Joan, "Leave me out in this dark hole? I should say not."

"All right," he replied. He glanced again through the peep hole. The woman was asleep. She lay on her side, her red hair turning the pillow to blood. She still had on the abbreviated costume she had been wearing on Mercury Sam's stage.

Jaro opened the panel, crawled into the room, Joan on his heels.

He went up to the bed, looked down at the sleeping woman. He thought she looked hollow cheeked, unhappy in her sleep; nothing like the flaming wanton who was known throughout the Universe as the Red Witch. He touched her shoulder.

She opened her eyes. They were a vivid green. Recognition swept her features.

V

"JARO!" she cried, a note of fright in her voice. She jerked up, swung her bare legs off the bed onto the floor. "What do you want? How did you get here?" Those amazing green eyes flicked past him, discovered Joan. She wasn't too frightened to raise her eyebrows.

"There are a few questions I'd like to ask," he replied coolly. "Just who is behind this revolution?"

There was the faintest hesitancy in her reply. "Hodes. Who did you think?"

He looked skeptical, waited.

She said, "You don't believe me? When I talked with you, I exaggerated perhaps. But there is very much money involved, very much indeed. Should the Mercurians be successful, they would take possession of the Latonka Trust, the plantations, and the mines. The Earthmen would be dispossessed. Naturally, they are very anxious to frustrate the revolution."

"But the Mercurians are in the right," Joan burst out. She had been swelling up like a toad in the effort to contain herself. "Albert Peet and his kind, stole everything in the first place. They deserve to be kicked out. Mercury has a right to self-government."

The Red Witch shrugged. "I'm not curious about the ethics. I'm paid by the Earthmen, not the Mercurians. Are you with us or against us, Jaro?"

He ignored her question, asked, "Are you being held by Karfial Hodes?"

She nodded.

"Why?"

She exhibited surprise. "Karfial Hodes knows that I am the principal agent of the counter revolutionaries. But if he thinks that by eliminating me he can block the forces opposing him, he's overestimating my importance."

"Eliminating?" said Jaro mildly. "Are you in any danger?"

She shrugged again. "The Mercurians aren't butchers. They merely hold me until the revolution begins."

Jaro said: "Where does Karfial Hodes keep himself?"

She shook her head.

"That little pianist, the gunman, how did he escape?"

"Stanley, you mean Stanley. Did he get away?" she asked him eagerly.

He nodded.

Her eyes narrowed; she bit her lip.

"That's all you want to tell me?" he said.

The look of fright reappeared in her green eyes. "What do you mean, Jaro?"

He said nothing.

"You know as much as I do," she assured him. "You believe me now, don't you, Jaro." Her voice was eager.

"No," he replied calmly.

"What are you going to do?" she whispered.

"Who are the others in this with you?"

"I can't tell you." She bit her lip, looked more frightened than ever.

"Who are the others?" he repeated mildly.

The red-headed singer leaped to her feet. Her figure was full, strikingly beautiful. She was well aware of her appeal. "Jaro," she cried, "I can't tell you. It would be as much as my life is worth. Not until I know what side you're on."

JARO regarded her calmly. At length he said, "You'll excuse us if we lock you in the dressing room?"

"But Jaro," she said; "aren't you going to take me with you?"

He shook his head.

"You're going to leave me here?" she repeated. She couldn't keep the relief out of her voice.

He laughed, said, "I'm afraid so."

A great weight seemed lifted from the red-headed singer's mind. With a resumption of her old bravado, she shrugged, walked into the dressing room. Her hips moved from side to side. Jaro shut the door, pushed the bed in front of it.

"The hussy!" said Joan.

Jaro wasn't sure but he thought he detected a feline note in her tone. He led the way back into the passage, closed the exit.

Joan clutched his hand again. "That woman!"

"Attractive, isn't she?" he said with a chuckle. "Ouch!" he said. "That wasn't very lady-like."

"What wasn't?" asked Joan sweetly. "I didn't do anything."

"Well, someone kicked me," he replied.

"You don't think I'd do a thing like that? Do you?"

"Yes," he said. He inched ahead along the lightless passage.

"Jaro."

There was no reply.

"Jaro!" cried the girl in panic. "Where are you? Wait for me, Jaro. I'll never kick you again."

"Is that a promise?" he asked from the darkness right at her ear.

"Eek!" she gasped. "Yes, it's a promise, though I regret it already."

He chuckled, said, "Give me your hand," led her forward.

They had gone only a few yards, when

his foot struck an obstacle. "Careful," he warned. "Here's a stair." They crept up to the next level. The familiar alcoves began again along the right hand wall. He tried the first one. It revealed a rectangular tank of water some ten by twenty feet. The walls were a mosaic of hand painted tile depicting Nemi, the rain god, descending to Mercury in a shower, Nemi searching for his bride, Nemi at the nuptial feast. The fourth wall was the one through which they were looking; and they couldn't see its decoration. From the realism of the ancient artist and the sequence of events, Jaro decided it was just as well they couldn't.

"Whew," he said, "what a bathroom!"

Joan put her eye to the peep hole. Jaro gaped in amazement. From a circular hole in the ceiling poured a curtain of rain. The shaft, he realized, must lead straight up through the different levels and through the roof. A raised dais with a rim around it received the rain in the center of the room. The surface of the dais he saw, was composed of a springy wire mesh through which the water drained into some subterranean channel.

"The bed of Nemi," said Joan. "That's where the queen must sleep on her wedding night. Nemi is supposed to visit her in the rain."

"What a clammy way to spend your wedding night," Jaro said, putting his eye back to the aperture. The appointments of the chamber were magnificent. It glowed with a rosy, pulsating light. The floor was carpeted with a shaggy white rug; a divan large enough to hold at least six people rested against the left hand wall. Around the walls ran murals depicting the exploits of Nemi: Nemi touching the red egalte which burst into flower, Nemi squeezing the juice from a cluster of Latonka grapes.

The next room proved to be an ordinary sleeping chamber, obviously the bedroom of the queen for the remainder of the year. Jaro saw a beautiful Mercurian girl packing clothes and trinkets into a chest. The green band about her ankle marked her as a temple priestess. She was singing a lilting, happy refrain in the odd language of Mercury as she went about her work.

Joan put her eye to the hole.

"That's the ex-queen," she informed

him. "She's getting ready to move to the apartments of the temple priestess."

"She doesn't seem unhappy at her approaching bereavement," said Jaro.

Joan sniffed. "Not likely."

"I'm going in to talk to her," said Jaro.

"Are you crazy?" cried Joan in alarm. She tugged at him arm, but he was already pulling back the secret entrance.

THE QUEEN had her back to them. Jaro closed the entrance, coughed discreetly. The girl spun around, her hand to her mouth.

"How should I address her?" He whispered over his shoulder.

"I don't think you need bother with formalities," observed Joan in a bitter voice, "not after your entrance."

The queen said, "You are an Earthman."

Jaro said, "Yes, your majesty."

"Majesty?" echoed the Mercurian girl. Her eyes were golden, oblique, curious, her hair a fine graven ebony. She had long, black lashes, bright red lips. Her skirt and jacket were green. "I don't quite understand. I am not very familiar with your language."

Jaro grinned. "I suppose our entrance was not exactly orthodox but the fact is that we are escaped prisoners." The queen raised her fine black brows.

"How did you get here?" Her voice had an odd foreign flavor. Jaro couldn't put his finger on it, but it was there. He said, "That is unimportant. We are searching for Karfial Hodes. I know of no one more apt to be informed of his whereabouts than you."

"And what is it that you want with Karfial Hodes?"

Jaro had the impression that she was stalling, listening expectantly. He said, "Where is Hodes?"

Before she could answer, the doors on either side burst open. A dozen priests of Nemi burst into the room. Jaro caught a triumphant smile on the queen's face, then he kicked the closest Mercurian on the knee. The priest screamed, doubled to the floor. He lifted a second bodily, hurled him into the press, bowling over several others. A priest lit on his back. He flipped him over his shoulder. He rammed an elbow into someone's eye, smashed his

fist against a mouth. He kicked another priest on the knee. He got hold of one of the fellows by a leg, whirled him around like a club. He caught a glimpse of the queen, her expression registering frightened dismay. She was stabbing a button on the table, obviously the means by which she had summoned her defenders. A whole horde of priests crowded into the room.

Behind him Joan screamed. "Jaro," she cried. "Help!"

Jaro laid the poor fellow he had been using as a bludgeon on the floor.

"All right," he said. "I surrender." Everyone, especially the priests, appeared relieved.

"Take them before Karfial Hodes," directed the queen. Her yellow eyes regarded the gaunt Earthman with amazement, tinged with respect. The priests laid hold of him gingerly, urged him toward the door. He stood head and shoulders above the Mercurians.

He looked at Joan quizzically, said: "All roads lead to Rome."

"Oh dear," said Joan. "I'm not fitted for this kind of a life. I'm a secretary, a darned good secretary. I don't know how I ever got involved in this mess."

From the queen's apartment they emerged into a broad passage. A concourse of Mercurians moved in streams all about them. They flung eager questions at their guards, chattered, laughed. The flutes, too, were audible once more: thin treble pipings, like the pipes of Pan, Jaro thought.

"How long does the Festival last?" he asked Joan.

"What?" she said. "Oh. Roughly a week. It's half over now."

They came to the end of the corridor, mounted a broad staircase. Jaro sensed that they were still deep in the bowels of Mercury. At length, they were halted before a massive door. A priest stood at the entrance. There was an exchange of words between their captors and the solitary guard. Satisfied, the priest stood aside, flung open the door. Jaro and Joan were motioned inside. The portal clanged shut behind them.

"Caught again," said Joan. "I'll never feel at home now unless I'm behind bars."

Jaro chuckled. "This isn't a jail," he

pointed out. "The cells are below us. I think we are about to see Karfial Hodes at last."

THE ROOM in which Jaro and Joan found themselves was a large, bare, vaulted hall. At the far end, Jaro saw an imposing door. He advanced curiously toward it.

"Are we just supposed to wait?" asked Joan. "How does Karfial Hodes know we're here?"

"He's probably been notified by visoscreen," he assured her. He pushed experimentally at the massive door. It moved easily beneath his touch. "Hey!" he said. "It's not locked." His voice echoed hollowly in the vaulted antichamber.

"Are we going in?" asked Joan weakly. "As if I didn't know already."

Jaro gave the door a push. It swung wide.

"Look!" cried Joan. "My god, look!"

He saw a magnificent room, the floor of polished marble. A row of fluted columns ran down each side. There was a desk, a modern desk, strangely out of place in the antique setting, opposite the door through which they had entered. Across its polished surface a man sprawled limply, just as if he had fallen forward from his chair in sleep.

With a bound Jaro sprang across the room, felt the man's withered wrist for any signs of pulse. He was a very old man, he saw, and he was quite dead.

"Karfial Hodes!" murmured Joan in a low frightened voice. "I saw him once in a street procession. Is he dead, Jaro?"

Jaro nodded. From the back of the old man's neck, he plucked a tiny metallic splinter. "They got him with a poisoned dart gun. He's still warm. It couldn't have happened but a minute before."

"Oh, Jaro, and he was such a nice old man. Who could have done it?"

Jaro straightened, said, "One of Albert Peet's renegade whites."

"Ugh! And to think I worked for that man."

But Jaro wasn't listening. He had gone behind the desk. "This is how they got him," he said, excitement in his voice. It was, Joan sensed, the excitement of the man hunter when he grows hot on the trail of his quarry. There was a cold and ruth-

less edge to his voice which she had not heard before, and for the first time she found herself a little afraid of this strange man about whom she really knew so little. Hesitantly she edged after him.

Behind the desk, she saw a panel gaping ajar in the stone wall. It was the same kind of panel which gave admittance to the secret passages on the lower levels. Jaro was nowhere in sight.

"In here," he called, and Joan thought of the baying of wolves running strong on a hot scent. She bit her lip, slipped into the blackness after him.

"Jaro, where are you?"

"This must be how they got him," he said from the darkness beside her. "When that gunman—the little one who was abducted along with the Red Witch, you remember—when he escaped he must have stumbled on these passages, I suppose that was the important information he had for Albert Peet."

"They couldn't have gone very far," suggested Joan.

"No," said Jaro. "Not very far, I hope." He closed the panel. At once the darkness gathered about them, pressed in on them from every side. It was so dark that the girl could bring her hand right up to her face without being able to distinguish a thing.

A RAY of light jumped from the panel as Jaro extracted the plug, applied his eye to the aperture. He could see the back of the dead Mercurian leader crumpled across the desk and beyond him the open door into the vaulted antichamber.

As he looked, a Mercurian, the priest who had been on guard at the entrance, appeared in the doorway. Other Mercurians were staring over the priest's shoulder. Consternation was written large across their usually impassive features.

"Sehr Karfial Hodes!" the priest cried, and then uttered a string of Mercurian words quite unintelligible to the listening Jaro.

Suddenly, it seemed to dawn on the priest that there had been foul play. He ran across the floor, turned up his dead leader's face. The benign, peaceful, half smile on the old Mercurian's lips seemed to belie his tragic murder. Jaro put back the plug.

"We're in for it," he said grimly. "The Mercurians must believe that we murdered Karfial Hodes."

"What will they do?" the girl asked in a small voice.

"I don't imagine they'll pin any medals on us," he replied dryly.

"Why did they have to kill Karfial Hodes?" There was a puzzled, tragic note in the girl's voice. "He was such a harmless old man."

"Albert Peet can answer that question," Jaro said quietly. "In fact, he can answer a lot of questions that I intend to ask him. But where can I hide you?"

"Hide me!" ejaculated Joan. "If you get three feet away I'll scream. I don't know why I should feel safer when you're here—I've been shot at, abducted and jailed since I met you—but I do."

For a moment Jaro hesitated, then he fumbled for her wrist in the dark, found it. "Come on," he said. "We'll see where this passage leads."

They crept ahead, encountered a stair, descended thirty-two steps. Again they felt their way along a passage, went down a second flight of steps.

"If this keeps up we'll come out on the under side of Mercury," he said. "Ouch!" There was a dull thud.

"What was that?" cried Joan.

"Me. I cracked my skull on this con-founded ceiling." He paused. "Joan, we must be on the same level as my cell." He got down on hands and knees, crawled along the passage, running his fingers across the stones.

"Ah!" he said. His questing fingers had discovered a hole close to the floor.

"Where are you?" Joan cried.

"Here."

She moved up cautiously until she bumped into him. "Whatever are you after, groveling on the floor?" she asked greatly relieved.

"I've a hunch," he replied. "Wait here!"

He wormed his way into the hole, found it blocked by the stone. Delicately, he ran his fingers over its surface seeking its mechanism. A catch? There it was. He released it, hauled. The stone slid towards him. Backing out of the hole, he drew the block after him. Joan stifled a scream as he bumped into her.

With the block clear of the wall, he

wriggled back into the hole. If possible the Stygian blackness was thicker than ever. There should be a cell on the other side of the wall. He lay still, listened. The silence was as absolute as the dark. He wormed his way ahead. With a shock he felt his fingers come in contact with bare flesh. A hand flicked across his face, clutched his throat with a grip of iron.

Jaro wrenched backward, tried to call out, but that unrelenting grip on his throat held like a vise, choked off his words. His antagonist never uttered a sound. Silently, blindly they fought in the four foot square cell.

Jaro got his hands on his antagonist's wrists, wrenched. His lungs were on fire, he thought wildly that no sensation was as agonizing as not being able to draw a breath. The man had succeeded in getting both hands on his throat. Jaro drew up his legs, kicked. His feet struck flesh, the iron fingers were torn from his throat. Blessed air poured into his lungs.

Dimly, he realized that Joan was calling his name from the passage. Then she screamed.

A man's voice beside him said: "Jaro! My God! Is that you, Jaro?"

"Yes," panted Jaro, recognizing Landovitch, the T.I.S. agent. "I was looking for you. There's a hole here some place." His fingers were wildly running across the cold stones. "Joan's outside in the passage. Something's happened."

Again the girl screamed.

"Here it is," said Jaro with relief, dived through. Once clear of the walls, he stood up, cracked his head on the low ceiling.

"Joan!" he said. He could hear Landovitch grunting and puffing, trying - to squeeze his big frame through the narrow aperture. The girl did not answer.

"Joan!" he called louder. His voice came back to him hollowly in the pitch black corridor. "Joan!"

There was no answer. The girl was gone.

VI

JARO hesitated undecided which way to go.

"Pull me out of here," Landovitch pleaded. "I'm stuck."

He felt around, seized the big T.I.S.

agent's wrist, tugged. Landovitch came free, stood up, cracked his head against the roof with a thud.

"It's a low ceiling," said Jaro.

"This is a fine time to be telling me."

"They've got Joan," said Jaro. "Which way could they have gone?"

"Joan?" echoed Landovitch dubiously. "Oh, you mean Miss Webb, that pretty girl who was with us when the fight started in the grog shop." He paused. "Who's got her? Where are we anyway?"

"Shut up!" said Jaro impolitely. "I'm trying to orientate myself. We're in the Temple of Nemi."

Landovitch whistled softly. "The rain god."

But Jaro was paying no attention. "There must be a set of stairs at each end of this corridor," he mused. "We just came down one. That leads to the apartment where Hodes was murdered. I think it's a blind alley. But the other stair goes up to the chambers of the temple priestesses. That must be the way they've gone. Come on." He started off along the corridor.

"Hey!" Landovitch said plaintively. "Which way are you going?" He reached out, clutched Jaro's arm, hung on. "Who's got the girl?"

"Peet's men," Jaro grunted. "It must have been Peet's men who got Joan. They murdered Karfiel Hodes just a few minutes ago and escaped through this corridor. We were trailing them. I don't think the Mercurians even suspect the existence of these passages." They reached the steps, ascended to the next level, hurried blindly along the corridor of the alcoves.

"But how do you figure Peet's men knew about these passages?" asked Landovitch in a puzzled voice.

"That gunman of Peet's," said Jaro. "The one who was captured along with the Red Witch. He must have discovered them. It's the only way I can figure he escaped."

Again they stumbled up a flight of steps.

"This ought to be on the same level as Nemi's apartment," volunteered Jaro. Suddenly his fingers encountered space in the right hand wall.

"What's up," said Landovitch, bumping into him.

"There's a corridor branching off here," he replied. "Which way? Which way?"

"One's as good as another," said Landovitch.

Without replying, Jaro pushed ahead along the left hand corridor. He had not gone fifty paces before he halted again, began to curse. The words flowed out, cold, furious.

The hair on the back of Landovitch's neck crawled. He'd never heard Jaro vent his anger before. "What is it now?" he asked.

"The corridor splits up into three different passages. This rotten place is a rat-run." He drew a breath. "We might as well try to find our way out and hunt up Albert Peet."

He led the way along the center corridor, fell up an unexpected flight of steps, resumed his cursing.

Landovitch wanted to laugh but decided against it. He had never known Jaro to be as wrought up over anything as he seemed to be about the girl's abduction.

Jaro scrambled to his feet, mounted the steps with Landovitch still following. The head of the stair was blocked. He fumbled a moment in the dark, found the omnipresent plug, extracted it.

The room into which he found himself looking was an ordinary Mercurian apartment of the lower strata of the city. It was untenanted, bare, dusty. He worked a moment at the panel, discovered the catch, swung it back. He and the T.I.S. agent stepped into the apartment.

"Whew!" said Landovitch. "What a relief. I was beginning to think I might rot down there." His blond hair was a mass of clotted blood and dirt. One eye was black, his clothes torn and stained.

"You look at it if you'd been blown from a rocket tube," commented Jaro dryly, as he made for the street door.

"You don't look like a gay Lothario yourself," Landovitch retorted.

JARO opened the door, peered out cautiously. The vaulted burrow which served as a street between the apartments was deserted. The green globes were dim. They must be on one of the lowest levels of Acecia.

"Irving," said Jaro, turning to the T.I.S. agent. "I'm going to pay Albert Peet a visit. He's going to talk whether he wants or not. I'm afraid it won't be strictly

legal, and I don't want to embroil you in any difficulty. I think we'd best part."

"Never mind that," began Landovitch, then halted, seized Jaro by the shoulder. "Listen!" he commanded.

From up the street came faintly the noise of shouts and screams, then the unmistakable zizz-boom! of a rocket gun. The two men looked at each other. The silence was immediately punctured by a scattering rattle of dum-dum fire.

The firing drew closer. At the end of the street, a party of Colonial guards trotted into sight. They were dragging the rocket gun and were still in an orderly retreat.

Half way up the arched passage they made a stand. Jaro watched them set up the rocket gun. All except the gun crew faded into doorways. Jaro swung his eyes back to the head of the street. A company of Fazoqls, the killer caste of Venus, were advancing in short dashes from doorway to doorway. The rocket gun went zizz-boom! The street ahead was suddenly clear of Fazoqls except for a few sprawled figures.

"The revolution!" said Landovitch: "They've started the revolution."

THE VENUSIAN mercenaries had begun to snipe at the guards again with the dum-dum rifles. Several of the Earthmen slumped to the pavement. The Venusians, Jaro guessed, were crawling through the apartments, flanking the little group about the rocket gun. In a moment the Colonial guards were forced to retreat again.

Pulling their rocket gun after them, they took up a position directly in front of the apartment where Jaro and Landovitch watched, wide-eyed.

"Back! Get back!" Jaro pulled Landovitch into an adjoining chamber. A string of dum-dums exploded against the outer wall as some Fazoql raked the building with his rapid fire rifle. The door burst open. A burly Colonial guard, his gaudy uniform soiled and ragged, stumbled inside, took up a position just within the doorway.

"Hey!" said Jaro cautiously.

The guard swung around, his finger on the button of the Dixon Ray Rifle. Jaro noticed that sweat had traced paths down

his grimy face. His hat was gone. Slowly his features relaxed as he recognized the two men as Terrestrials.

"What's coming off?" Jaro asked.

The guard grunted, glanced out the door. "The Mercurians have risen." Up the street a Fazoql moved in a doorway. A yellow ray leaped from the bell-shaped mouth of the guard's rifle, bathed the doorway in a saffron glare. The Fazoql tumbled into the street.

"They've hired the Venusian mercenaries," the guard continued. "We're outnumbered ten to one."

"Who's leading the revolution?" asked Jaro.

"Karfiel Hodes, the patriot," replied the guard. He flung the words over his shoulder, keeping his eyes up the vaulted passage.

"But Hodes is dead!" expostulated Jaro.

"Not so you could notice it," grunted the guard. Outside the rocket gun went zizz-boom! "How do you explain this?" He took a scrap of paper from his tunic, tossed it to Jaro.

"What is it?" Landovitch said.

The paper, Jaro saw, was a declaration. It read:

"To the Mercurian People:

"The time has come to cast off the yoke of Earth. All loyal Mercurians are called upon to purge our ranks of the greedy Terrestrial parasites who have been exploiting our resources. Arise and take back that which is rightfully yours."

It was printed in both Mercurian and English and signed: "Karfiel Hodes, Imperator."

"Those have been stuck up all over the city," the guard informed them. "They've stormed the Spacegraphy Station and sent an ultimatum to the Earth Congress."

Landovitch whistled. "But it's race suicide," he said, aghast. Both he and Jaro were thinking of what must be transpiring back on Earth at this minute.

File upon file of huge battle spacers would be floating free from their sheds. Slim cigar-shaped corvettes, tenders, all the countless craft that comprised Earth's fleet, the mightiest fleet in the Universe, would be jockeying into position for their dash across space. Even now Earth's Sun

Patrol must be hurtling upon the city of Acecia. The little uprising would be quelled almost before it got under way, martial law declared, the revolutionists hunted out, destroyed ruthlessly. Earth had experienced four such uprisings in different parts of its far flung empire within the past decade and she would not be inclined to be lenient.

"They haven't got the chance of a snowball in hell!" Jaro said bitterly.

The rocket gun exploded: zizz-boom! Again the guard sprayed a doorway with the yellow ray, cursed. Three distorted figures huddled about the carriage of the rocket gun, but it was still being served.

"They gutted the palace of the Governor," said the guard, "and hung the Governor from his own doorway. They've wrecked the offices of the Latonka Trust too."

"What about the Terrestrials?" asked Jaro.

"Most of them got away in the spacers before they captured the port." The guard spat, wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. "The Mercurians aren't fighting. It's mostly Venusian mercenaries and a few renegade whites."

SOMETHING exploded in the guard's chest. He fell half in, half out of the doorway. Outside the gun captain blew a whistle. The pitiful remainder of the Colonial guards struck their rocket gun, retreated down the passage at a trot, drawing it after them.

"What does it mean?" Landovitch asked in bewilderment. "They couldn't have formed an alliance with Venus."

"Hardly," replied Jaro. "They would have had to sign agreements with about seven hundred and fifty different states, principalities and democracies." He yanked the T.I.S. agent back into the chamber again. "Don't let those birds lay an eye on you," he cautioned.

The Fazoqls had begun to stream past outside. They were lean, bearded men, for the most part armed with rapid fire dum-dum rifles. They all had the blue star of the Venusian caste of killers tattooed on their foreheads. The noise of fighting waned, died down the vaulted passage.

"I can't believe it." Landovitch shook his head. "The Mercurians are throwing

away any chance for freedom. The Earth Congress will never grant them their independence now."

"I don't believe it," said Jaro grimly. "In fact, I don't put any credence in it at all."

The T.I.S. agent looked at him, perplexed. "But . . ." he began.

"Come on," Jaro interrupted savagely. "The answer to any number of things lies at the office of the Latonka Trust, if I'm not mistaken." He stooped over the dead Colonial guard, relieved him of his Dixon Ray Rifle, stepped over him into the street. Shaking his head bull-like, Landovitch followed. He obviously wanted to ask questions, but the set, grim expression on Jaro's face forbade it.

As they approached the Terrestrial quarter, the signs of bitter street fighting grew more apparent. They passed a barricaded corner where a pile of dead Colonial guards attested to the stubbornness of their defense. The street beyond was littered with the bodies of Fazoqls and an occasional renegade Earthman. There were no signs of Mercurians anywhere. Jaro imagined that they had retreated deep into hidden burrows and rooms until the fighting was over.

Two Earthmen came out of an apartment just ahead, dragging a pretty Mercurian between them. They spotted Jaro and Landovitch, halted, their hands creeping upward towards shoulder holsters.

"Who are you?" one asked, and his voice was death itself.

"Have you seen the Red Witch?" said Jaro, on a wild gamble. "We've got news for her. It's important."

"Naw," growled one of the renegades suspiciously. He turned to his companion, said: "Let's get going." Between them, the gunmen hustled the frightened girl off a bisecting alley.

Landovitch was frowning. "This is a wild goose chase," he said. "The Mercurians have wrecked the Latonka Trust building. Albert Peet was probably one of the first men to escape from Mercury when the revolution broke."

"I'm gambling," replied Jaro, "that he's got a hideout in the building some place. I think he's waiting for everything to blow over." He set off down the corridor at an easy lope. With a shrug, Landovitch panted after him.

VII

THE Latonka Trust building was a wreck. When Jaro, with Landovitch at his elbow, prowled the gutted offices he was shocked at the extent of the damage wrought. He paused in what had been Albert Peet's private office. The desk was smashed in, the carpet ripped to shreds. The entire contents of a filing cabinet which lined one wall had been dumped on the floor.

"I give up," Landovitch said in disgust. "We've been over this building with a fine toothed comb. Albert Peet isn't here. He's probably halfway to Earth by this time."

Jaro regarded him sadly. "How you obtained your present eminence in what is supposed to be the most intelligent of intelligence services is the biggest unsolved mystery in the history of the T. I. S." He paused, raised his hand. "Quiet!"

The noise came again. It sounded like a mouse gnawing at the wainscoting behind Albert Peet's wrecked desk. Both men had their eyes glued to the polished wood paneling. Slowly, a section of the wainscoting was sliding aside. A Venusian Fazoql stepped out, caught sight of the two men, whipped a dart gun from a shoulder holster.

The bell-shaped ray rifle in Jaro's hand flamed yellow. The Fazoql was wrapped in a blinding glare. He fell like a stone, the death ray destroying the very life forces of the man.

Jaro picked up the Fazoql's dart gun, tossed it to Landovitch.

"Here, I've a hunch you're going to need this."

Landovitch whistled. He said, "Next time I contradict you, kick me." He tucked the dart gun in his waist band. "Lead on, comrade. Last Ditch Landovitch is right behind you."

A flight of steps yawned just beyond the false wainscoting. Warily, the two men descended the stair. There was a second door at the foot. It wasn't locked. Jaro flung it open, covered the room with the ray rifle.

An elderly Venusian sprang halfway to his feet, sank warily back in his chair. He was seated directly across a desk from

Albert Peet. The third occupant of the room, Jaro saw with astonishment, was the Red Witch.

For a tense second they observed each other narrowly. Albert Peet hunched his shoulders.

"Don't try anything, Albert!" cried the Red Witch, her voice shrill with fright. "You fool, that's Jaro Moynahan!"

But Peet was tugging at his pocket. Before Jaro could press the button of the ray rifle, something went "pop!" just behind him. Albert Peet slowly toppled sideways onto the floor. A small dart gun dropped from the dead Latonka Czar's fist.

"Thanks, Irving," said Jaro without removing his eyes from the elderly Venusian or the red-headed singer.

The Venusian, he noticed, had two blue stars tattooed on his forehead. Probably, Jaro thought, he was the leader of the mercenaries.

The Venusian said, "That was a very neat shot," in perfect English. He turned to Jaro. "I think we have met before."

Jaro frowned.

"In the services of Chaldmar, Zealot of the Venusian state of Zeld," the Fazoql prompted. "You were Captain of the Imperial Guard at the time."

Jaro's eyes lighted with recognition. "Certainly, Colonel. How stupid of me. I'm really very sorry that we're on opposing factions."

"Fortunes of war," the Colonel smiled. "Though with Albert Peet dead the game is up, anyway."

DURING the conversation the Red Witch's green eyes had first widened, then narrowed. "You getting ready to sell me out, Colonel?" she asked angrily.

The Venusian turned to her, said, "Miss Mikail, I couldn't possibly sell you out. I was never cognizant of any contract between us. My men were hired by Albert Peet. So were yours. With him dead, our bargain ends."

"Colonel," said Jaro, "would you mind telling me what was the nature of your agreement with Peet?"

"Not at all," said the Venusian. "We were hired to fake a revolution—a convincing revolution, you understand—in order that the Earth Congress would

abandon the idea of giving the Mercurians their independence. Mr. Peet, I believe, had extensive holdings here that would have been jeopardized had the Mercurians recovered their freedom."

Landovitch whistled softly.

"Who wrecked the offices of the Latonka Trust?" asked Jaro.

The Venusian smiled. "That was my idea. An artistic touch to divert suspicion. You see, before the Earth forces could arrive my men were to escape aboard a space liner. The entire blame for the revolution was to be cast on Karfial Hodes."

"Colonel," said Jaro, "I regret the necessity very much, but I'm going to ask you to command your men to lay down their arms."

The old Venusian smiled, said: "Hardly that, Captain. As I said before, with Albert Peet dead, so is the revolution. Our job is done. If you'll be good enough to excuse me I'll recall my men and get them aboard the space liner." He stood up slowly.

For a moment the two men were silent, then Jaro moved aside from the door. "Good luck, Colonel. You know that you'll be outlawed by the Earth Congress."

"Yes," said the Colonel. "Thanks for the sporting chance." He shook hands with Jaro, nodded to Landovitch, passed out the door.

"I suppose you know what you're doing," said Landovitch when he was gone.

"Don't be so conscientious," Jaro grinned. "You couldn't arrest all the Venusian mercenaries by yourself. The Earth Patrol can hunt them down. Anyway, I owed the old gentleman that. If it hadn't been for him I still would be rotting in a Venusian jail."

"What about me?" said the Red Witch.

"You?" said Jaro grimly. "You are going to be the star witness in the greatest case on Landovitch's record." He paused, added; "for which you might get off with a light sentence—say five years."

The red-headed singer obdurately set her mouth. Landovitch looked startled.

JARO turned to the T.I.S. agent. "You heard the Colonel say that Karfial Hodes was to be the goat for the fake

revolution. There was only one fly in Peet's ointment. As long as Karfial Hodes was alive, he could present himself before the Earth Congress, denounce the revolution, and the whole scheme would blow up like a dum-dum shell. Hodes simply had to be put out of the way. But the Mercurian patriot couldn't be found. Peet was desperate. His campaign of propaganda had been started. That was when I was called in."

"I never wanted to call you," the red-headed singer broke out. "I told Albert he was a fool, that you were utterly unpredictable."

"By the way," said Jaro, "why did Karfial Hodes have you abducted?"

She shrugged. "He had the wind up, but he didn't know Albert Peet was behind the scene. He had learned, though, that I was one of the principal agents. He wanted to question me. I suppose he thought he might as well keep me out of mischief while he had me."

"Red," said Jaro coldly and catching the girl's eye. "Where is Joan Webb?"

"Joan Webb?" The Red Witch's eyes narrowed. "I suppose you mean that attractive brunette my men caught in the secret passages of Nemi's Temple when they came to release me."

Jaro said nothing.

The red-headed singer looked frightened, but determined. "She's my ace in the hole!"

Jaro took a step toward her.

"Don't touch me," she cried, "you'll never get her if you do!"

He halted in mid-stride.

Landovitch said: "Turn State's evidence. I can guarantee you complete amnesty."

"Not just a light sentence?"

"Complete amnesty," he assured her.

She hesitated, said, "Your words."

"You've my word," said Jaro. His voice was cold. "I don't threaten, Red, but if she's been harmed you won't come to trial."

The girl pulled her eyes from Jaro's, turned to Landovitch. "Yours," she said, "yours too."

"I give you my word, of course," he replied.

With a sigh of relief she sank back in her chair. "In there, boys." She mo-

tioned towards a door at the left of the chamber.

Jaro sprang forward, swung it open, revealed a large closet. Joan Webb, gagged, bound to a chair, regarded him from wide brown eyes. Behind him, the red-haired singer burst into laughter.

"She's been there all the time," she laughed. "You were bound to have found her. Jaro, Jaro, that was the most magnificent bluff I've ever pulled. And you fell for it. You, Jaro Moynahan, fell for it."

THE abortive revolution had brought the Festival to an abrupt conclusion. The city of Acecia licked its wounds and fretted under the grip of martial law, but negotiations for Mercurian independence had been reopened. Landovitch's report had exploded a bombshell in the Earth Congress, and it looked very much as if the negotiations might be successful at last.

"How does it feel to be famous?" Jaro asked. He and Joan and the T.I.S. agent were sitting in his room, sipping Latonka.

Landovitch said: "I wish you would have let me give credit where it was due."

"Publicity in my line," Jaro replied, "is not very good for business."

Someone rapped at the door. He opened it, revealed a small Mercurian boy in the uniform of the Spaceography Station.

"A spaceogram for Miss Webb," said the boy.

"Me?" cried Joan. "Who could be sending me a spaceogram?"

Jaro took the envelope, handed it to her, tossed the boy a coin. She tore it open eagerly.

"Why, it's from Prince Radhick of the Imperial Martian Court," she said with a puzzled frown. "He's offering me a post as secretary at two thousand notes a year. Two thousand notes a year! Think of it!"

Jaro started, said, "Two thousand notes!" He glanced angrily at Landovitch who was listening with a bland expression.

"Irving!" cried Joan rapturously and threw her arms about the blond T.I.S. agent's bull-like neck. "You're a perfect darling!"

"Let me see that spaceogram," said Jaro Moynahan darkly. He read: "You have been highly recommended by a dear friend

of mine, Mr. Irving Landovitch of the T.I.S."

"Jaro," cried the girl, "should I accept it?"

"What? Oh. Yes, of course. As it happens I know the prince very well. I think you'll find the work delightful. If I were you, I'd run down to the desk and get a spaceogram off to him right away." He almost shoved her out of the room. Then he went to the visoscreen, clicked it on, said: "When Miss Webb comes to send a spaceogram, take it, but don't send it. T.I.S. wishes to examine it. Yes. That's right. The T.I.S." He clicked the visoscreen off, turned to Landovitch.

"Now!" he exploded. "I told you to make that one thousand notes a year, not two thousand."

"I thought she was worth it," said Landovitch blandly.

Jaro glared at his friend, trying to keep the amusement from his eyes and face.

"That's as much as a general in the Martian army makes." He ran his fingers upward through his crisp black hair. "It's going to be difficult enough persuading the prince that I need a secretary at all as head of his army, let alone get him to pay her two thousands notes a year. When I asked you to send that fake spaceogram, if I'd . . ."

"But what a secretary," Landovitch interrupted, rolling his eyes.

"And that line," Jaro snorted. "'Recommended by a very dear friend of mine, Mr. Irving Landovitch.' The prince never even heard of you."

"He will, he will," Landovitch assured him.

Jaro stopped short. "What do you mean? What's coming off here?"

"I've been attached to the Terrestrial embassy at the Martian court."

"You couldn't by any chance, have applied for that post?" asked Jaro darkly.

The T.I.S. agent grinned. "As it happens, I did."

Suddenly both men laughed. Jaro glanced at his watch. "We've got to hurry. The ship leaves in forty-five minutes."

The door flew open, Joan sailed back into the room.

"Why so much amusement?" she said suspiciously. "We starting that *comrade* stuff again?"

"Get your hat on," Jaro said. "We have but forty-five minutes to make that Super Liner for Mars. We can stop by your rooms for your trunk on the way to the spaceport."

Joan drew back in amazement. "Forty-five minutes," she gasped. "But I haven't got a ticket."

"Oh, I've got the tickets," Jaro and Landovitch both said in unison. Then they closed their mouths, stared at each other.

A look of comprehension dawned on Joan's face. "Look, boys," she said grimly. "This isn't a put-up job, by any chance?"

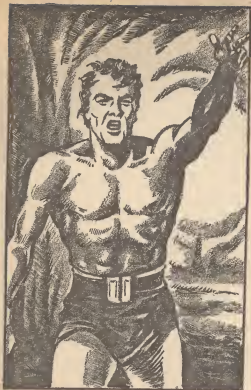
The two men recovered. Jaro said with wounded dignity, "'Put-up job.' No. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"No. Of course not," Landovitch echoed.

"I see," said Joan, amusement glinting through her eyes in spite of herself. "It's just by the purest sort of coincidence that we're all three going the same way."

Nodding, Jaro and Landovitch came forward—and laughing, the three began to walk. Somehow, the future looked promising—and dangerous.





PRODIGAL WEAPON

by
VASELEOS GARSON

Illustration by MURPHY.

Sean fixed his green eyes on the scarlet-kilted Krak whose light had so emotionlessly added him to the cargo of slaves for the Krak's home planet somewhere out in the reaches of space.

Sean grew aware of the monotonous voice of a Krak, tolling out what must be numbers as the yellow lights in the hands of other Kraks flicked haphazardly among the other residents of Sean's village. Then the monotonous voice sharpened, and the yellow lights stopped flickering.

There was silence then for a brief moment, while the eyes of those chosen and

NOTHING NEW . . . THIS. The viewpoint, maybe, was different, this time. The script was the same, only there were new actors in the cast of characters.

Human historians had written the story over and over. Even the *Kraks* probably had a parallel story in their world.

Sean McKenna flinched a little as the beam of the thin yellow light bit into his left shoulder, burning a crooked X into the tanned flesh. Then with a shrug, Sean nodded his red-thatched head slightly, moved into the rapidly growing queue of humans who watched the Krak counters with varied expressions, most of them quietly despairing.

Sean accepted his destiny with a slanted smile.

He, too, stared steadily at the impassive-faced *Kraks* whose naked torsos and hairless round heads glistened with sweat in the afternoon of Earth's sun.

He thought: They have two eyes, two ears, a nose, a mouth, one body, two arms and two legs just like us humans. But they are something apart from us, for they are the masters and we—his mind shrugged—are the slaves.



They were the pitiful remnants of a proud world, huddled into slave quarters on Karrak, dying before the cold brutality of the Kraks, seeking the Achilles' heel in the armor of their masters. One man alone still fought them—even he knowing he battled with a lance of straw.

those left behind touched briefly, despairingly. In that silence, Sean heard her voice and the quietness with which he had accepted the end of his earthly life almost vanished.

"Oh, Sean," she cried. "They didn't take me!" Sean's eyes darted to the edge of the crowd to where she stood, her arms stretched out supplicatingly to him; her soft red lips quivering; her blue eyes brimming; her soft black hair caressed by the afternoon wind.

Sean broke out of line then, almost running toward her. The scarlet-kilted Krak who had marked him reached out a re-



straining hand. His fingers bit into Sean's arm until the blood spurted; the shock of pain from his arm held in the Krak's unbreakable hold halted him.

He looked at her quietly then shrugged, and marched back to his place in the line.

He was unmindful of the pain in his wrenched arm as he moved along with the rest up the slanted walk to the oval door of the space ship. At the top he turned, and his voice rose above the murmur of the crowd.

"I'll come back, Maureen," he said, and blew her a kiss from his fingertips. Then he stepped into the darkness, following those others before him.

In the gloom, someone said: "Always the gallant one, eh, Sean? You know damn well that you'll never see Earth again. No one who ever left on these slave ships has ever come back."

"I think I recognize Michael O'Hara, the village pessimist," Sean replied and there was almost a lightness in his voice. They moved deeper into the bowels of the ship, aware of the curious scraping sound the Krak guards made as they walked with them.



THEY were all quiet, these men, women and children whom the Kraks had carelessly chosen, as they marched into the huge dark room that was to be their home for the journey to Karrar. The scraping noise moved through the room, then to the door of the hole. The portal shut with the dull sound of heavy metal. The scraping noise grew fainter, then it was gone.

Not until then did the humans give vent to their emotions. The sound of despair was hesitant at first—in a far corner a child gasped, coughed and then sobbed. It was the signal—and the mingled sounds of hysterical laughter, weeping, groaning were ragged knives twisting in Sean McKenna's heart. A rending cacophony of lost hope.

"Shut up," he shouted hoarsely. "This is no time for weeping and wailing; this is the time to think, to plan." For a moment the awful symphony subsided; then someone said wearily:

"Against the Kraks? What did planning ever do against them? They are invulnerable. We used atomic power, guns, knives, bow and arrows, even our fists against them. And they crushed us like rats in a corner."

The cacophony resumed, and Sean's shouting voice could not stop it now—he could not even hear his own voice. A hand touched his arm gently:

"Easy, Sean," Michael O'Hara whispered in his ear. "They are right. If we couldn't beat them as free men, how can we even think of it as slaves?"

"The fools," Sean said savagely. "No matter how weak they are, they can keep fighting, keep probing for a chink in their armor."

"No, Sean, for fifteen years we fought, seeking that chink, and failed to find it. Deep down in your heart you know the Kraks cannot be beaten. Physically, they are to us as we are to new-born babes—no weapon of man can touch them, and did you ever hear of a Krak dying of disease?"

"No, we met a better adversary. Mother of Erin, Sean, we deserve to be slaves, we haven't the accoutrements to take on the Universe Champion."

"There's nothing anywhere that hasn't

a weakness, Mike. I aim to find the weakness."

Mike O'Hara grunted: "Why this sudden fervor to destroy the Kraks, anyway? Until today, you were content to go fishing and hunting without thought of them. Now you've done a right-about-face."

"I know," said Sean, and there was chagrin in his voice. "Until today, they hadn't bothered me."

"So you want to embroil the whole human race in your fight, eh?"

"Oh, hell, Mike, it's not my fight—it's humanity's battle for self-preservation. You know that as well as I do. Besides, wouldn't you like to see Jane again?"

"That hurt, Sean," Mike said softly.

Sean touched him lightly on the shoulder: "Sorry, Mike, but don't you see? All of us want to see the ones we love again. And we won't, if we let despair grab us."

"All right," said Mike. "I'll go along with you. But it's no go just the same."

"Pessimist," Sean said and laughed softly. But he was glad the blocky, black-haired Mike was with him.

THE uprooting of these humans from their home of ages had been simple enough, Sean decided. Except for the nausea that held the stomach in noisome fingers when the Krak ship broke loose from the earth.

Where there more captives this time than in the long years before? Were there 1,000 Krak ships—instead of 500—transplanting men and women and children to that scarlet land of Karrar?

Sean said as much to Mike, and Mike said: "I heard before we left that this would be the biggest batch." Mike looked harried in the yellow wall light. "Sean," he said quickly, with a twist on his lips: "How's the search coming?"

Sean jerked his red-thatched head around, stared at him.

"Why the sudden earnestness?" Mike licked his lips quickly. "I didn't know it before, but just now when I was looking over the people here, I found Marcia, and she's sick."

"Marcia?" Sean repeated. "I thought you and she had busted up that romance?"

Mike nodded: "She did," he said

quietly. "But I'll never stop loving her."

"Mike, how about Jane? You and she were to be married—tomorrow, wasn't it?"

"I know, I know," Mike said hurriedly. "But Marcia's sick, and she looked at me so appealingly when I recognized her, it all came back. The least I can do is comfort her."

"Sure, sure . . ." Sean said. That curious scraping sound that marked the coming of a Krak interrupted them.

It was the scarlet-kilted Krak who had marked Sean for the trip. He stood inside the open prison door, his naked torso gleaming in the yellow light and his hairless round head turning.

His round head stopped turning as his dark eyes above the wide flat nose fastened on Sean's red hair.

"You," he mouthed, "with the red hair. Come!"

Sean moved forward cautiously, his nerves atingle, his strong hands doubled into fists.

He followed the scarlet kilt out of the packed prison room, along an interminable series of passageways that led upward, and finally entered a room about twenty feet wide and thirty feet long.

It was innocent of furniture or decoration. There were no windows.

But standing in the middle of the room was an eight-foot Krak, dwarfing even the seven-foot bulk of his guide.

The scarlet-kilted Krak turned to him.

"Find your answer," the scarlet-kilted Krak said cryptically. He pointed to the Krak, naked save for a kind of breechclout about his loins. "He is your subject."

Sean was staring at his guide, startled out of his usual acceptance of the bizarre and the trite.

"Our audios picked up your plotting," the scarlet-kilted one said. "We do not wish to kill you, you are much more valuable on Karrar. But we cannot have restless humans fired by one like you who thinks we are vulnerable."

"There is a Krak. Kill him if you can." The scarlet-kilted Krak turned to the other standing in the center of the room.

"You have understood my words, Klash? You understand that you will allow this human to do all in his power to kill you."

Allow him all liberties until you are convinced that he has run out of ways in which to take your life."

"Yes, O, Ralk." Klash bent his huge bald head.

Ralk called aloud in his own tongue. Another Krak appeared pushing a plastic crate before him. He pushed the crate into the room. Then he went out, followed by Ralk. At the door Ralk stopped and said:

"Human, there are many weapons there. Use them, and see if you can kill one of us." Then he went out.

Sean McKenna was alone with the brute called Klash.

He moved to the box, looked in.

He looked up then at Klash, and whistled. "You must be tough, brother." Then he hauled the array of weapons from the crate. He laid them on the duralloy deck beneath his feet.

A high-powered rifle, a meat ax, a sledge hammer, an acetylene torch, a sword, a rope, a crowbar. Then a grenade. Sean laid the last item gently aside, and remarked. "That'd kill *me*."

Then he dumped the whole mass of weapons out on the deck.

IT WAS a very good collection of various Earth and Krak weapons. Besides diverse types of guns, powder, electric and air operated, there were blowguns of all lengths, complete with quivers of poison-dipped arrows. There were many weapons made by the Kraks, only one or two of which Sean recognized.

He picked up the little hand-gun that emitted the burning ray.

He trained it on the Krak's chest, flicked the little button wide open. Such power exploded a human being, instantly converting the moisture in his system to steam.

Klash stood there, impassive. Sean pumped a full round of bullets at the Krak from the high-powered rifle, then hurled himself on the floor to dodge the ricocheting bullets. He got up, a rueful grin on his thin lips, and shot assorted poisonous darts through the blowguns.

The poison was sudden death to any earthly thing.

Klash was impassive.

Sean hefted a battle-ax that the Kraks apparently had filched from some museum. He walked up slowly toward Klash, the

double-bitted ax swinging heavily in his hand.

Sean took a stance, spat on his palms, and swung the ax, unmindful that he ripped open the wound Ralk had made when he stopped him from moving toward Maureen.

The bright blade gleamed in the yellow light, the muscles, lean and sinewy across Sean's back rippled and tore his tunic across the back. The head of the ax hit Klash waist-high and bounced, flipping Sean to the deck. Klash rocked a little on his feet from the shock. That was all.

Sean, a desperate grin tightening his lips, threw the book at Klash—he tied the hemp rope about his neck and tried to strangle the Krak; he put the crow-bar in Klash's mouth, tried to break the jaws; turned the blow torch against his chest. No response.

At long last, after he exhausted almost the complete roster of weapons, Sean looked thoughtfully at the grenade. Then he shook his head.

Sean walked up to Klash, stared up at his towering bulk. Klash looked down at him, impassive. Sean laughed then and hurled himself upward, lashing out with his bony fists at the Krak's neck and shoulders.

The impassivity vanished from Klash's face. It twisted, almost as if in pain, Sean thought, before the Earthman's senses were washed out in a rocking shock as one big fist lashed against the side of his head. The echo of his own laughter was the last sound he heard.

SEAN still saw that strange look on Klash's face when he opened his eyes into the glaring yellow light. But the picture vanished as pain shuddered through his body.

Mike's voice worked its way through his pain.

"Mother of Erin, Sean, what did they do to you?"

"Uh," grunted Sean and moved to a sitting position against the wall and looked down at his body and legs. He was covered with bruises, yellow and red and blue and black, and each throbbed its own special melody of hurt.

"I don't know, Mike. I passed out when Klash hit me."

Mike said: "Old Doc Perkins said there isn't a square inch of your body that hasn't

a bruise. What he can't figure is how you took such punishment without getting a bone broken."

"Hah," Sean tried to laugh through bruised lips. "Doc's wrong. They busted every bone in my body. Then they glued me together again." He paused.

"Mike, I found it."

"Sure, Sean," Mike put in gently. "You found it. That nice little pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Only it blew up in your face."

"No, Mike, I found that chink."

Mike gasped once, then sat there very quietly staring at the red-headed Sean.

Finally, he said, "Give me the solution."

"It's the bone from the shoulder to neck, Mike. That's the vulnerable part." He launched into a description of his hopeless task of trying to destroy Klash. "Then at the end, Mike, I jumped up and socked him in the neck and in that hollow in the shoulder.

"He winced, Mike, and I'll swear that he flinched in pain. Then he knocked me out."

"But how do you know it isn't the neck?"

"I told you I had that rope around his neck."

"Maybe he had a stomach ache or something that brought that look to his face."

"Holy Mother, Mike, if he'd eaten something that didn't agree with him, do you think he wait until then to feel painful?"

"Maybe it was the poison, Sean, just taking hold?"

"No, Mike, he grimaced just when my fist struck that bone. It was the first sign of pain during the whole time. That's got to be it, Mike. Kraks aren't invulnerable. They've just been careful not to let us find out."

"Why didn't they kill you then, when you found out?"

Sean shrugged the thought away. "Maybe Klash didn't tell them. Maybe it's just luck. I don't know. But I do know this, Mike, it's the first time that a Krak ever departed from that poker face."

Mike sat there, pessimism fighting with this new thread of hope.

"Okay," he said finally. "I guess we can try it, anyway. Though I don't think much of the idea. But it's a chance. And I sure would like to get Marcia back on earth."

"To meet Jane?" Sean asked quietly. Mike looked at him, almost like a boy caught with his hand in the jam jar.

It was some hours later, when Sean slapped the sandal against the palm of his hand and muttered:

"Sandals aren't much good as weapons, but they'll have to do." He looked at Mike and the other eleven men that the two of them had convinced, in whispers so that the audios would pick up only sounds and not the words of their plan.

Mike said: "He's due along here any minute now."

Sean nodded and slapped the sandal against the palm of his hand again.

A FAR OFF at first it was, that curious scraping sound the thighs of Kraks make as they walk. The thirteen men tensed, their palms sweating against the leather soles of the sandals they gripped so tightly.

The excitement had deadened the pain of Sean's bruises and he was waiting just as tensely as the others.

The other Earth people packed into the huge cell were staring at them, some licking their lips, some with questions fighting through the despair in their eyes—all of them dejectedly looking.

The cry was in Sean's mind: Oh, to destroy their despair that they might see once more with eyes of hope!

The scrape-scrape came closer. It halted outside the heavy metal door. Smaller bits of metal rattled; then the door opened inward.

Sean, being closest to the opening portal, swung his sandal first. It made a curious spitting sound. Forgetful of the wrenching pain, he leaped, wrapped an arm around the Krak's neck and lashed out with the sandal again and again.

The Krak reached up one powerful arm, ripped the red-headed Earthman from his perch. The other dozen Earthmen leaped on him then, their sandals flailing.

Sean, flung against the wall, tried to move, but his muscles were tar and wouldn't respond. He watched the battle, trying desperately to move.

Of a sudden then, he was biting his lips, and tears of chagrin were blinding his eyes. For the Krak still towered there, impassive and invulnerable, smashing the

Earthmen down with his huge fists. One of the thirteen, Bill Hawkins, lay on the deck of the prison, his head split open like a ruptured muskmelon.

Another moaned on the floor, helplessly trying to move both his broken arms. Mike fought to the last, but even his driving fists were stopped when the Krak pounded him on the side of the head and drove him to the floor.

The Krak looked around the prison room impassively, his bald head moving slowly, effortlessly.

Then he went out.

The tar that was his muscles finally set and Sean could move. He crawled to where Mike lay spread-eagled on the floor, took the black-topped head in his lap, rocked with it. "Oh, Mike, I'm sorry. I was so sure."

Tiny fists pounded on his bruised back. Sean started to turn. Then fingers were entwined in his red hair, yanking, bringing painful tears to his eyes.

"Get away from him, you beast." Sean saw tiny, blonde Marcia, her soft face twisted into harsh lines, pulling him away from Mike. He let Mike's head drop gently to the deck. Then he stood up. Instantly Marcia was beside Mike, touching him, talking to him softly.

Sean looked at Bill Hawkins lying dead there on the floor, the dark dead stuff smearing the polished surface. He looked at those others there. Despair was still there in their eyes, but something else, too.

They looked away from him, deliberately avoiding his eyes. The soft moaning of Jack Wilson turned him around.

"I'm sorry, Jack. It's my fault. I was so sure that was the vulnerable point."

Jack's pain-filled eyes looked down on his broken arms, then fastened on Sean.

"I wouldn't mind so much," Jack said through tight lips, "if it had worked." Then he looked away.

Sean turned to Mike and Marcia. Mike was sitting up now, shaking his head dazedly.

He saw Sean.

Mike said just one word before he stood up and walked away with Marcia.

The word was: "Satisfied?"

For the rest of the trip, Sean McKenna had plenty of room to stretch his body out. As if by pre-arranged signal, he was given

a wide berth, and those Earth people near him constantly tried to keep their backs to him.

Impassively, the Kraks had come, and when they left, the body of Bill Hawkins went with them, leaving only that dark dried stain on the prison deck as a reminder. Perhaps it hadn't been deliberate, but the prisoners had made a lane through so that each time Sean McKenna lifted his harried green eyes he saw the spot where Hawkins had died.

Hawkins' death twisted at Sean's heart, but it was always overshadowed by his conviction that the Kraks were vulnerable. Sean's mind probed, trying to find the answer to why Klash, the huge Krak, had flinched when Sean's fists had struck him.

If ever he had seen pain, Sean swore to himself, it had been on Klash's face then. But what had caused it?

What had made an invulnerable Krak wince at the blows from an Earthman's fist?

THERE WERE no earthly words to describe Karrar, the home planet of the Kraks.

Karrar was Karrar—a stupendous planet, brooded over by a sullen sun, a land of harsh reds and blacks. Impassive it was—as indestructible as its spawn of Kraks.

They'd known when the landing had been made, for the Kraks, their blank faces rigid, had come into the prison room and roughly strapped a metal contrivance on the back of each Earth person, man, woman and child.

For such a sullen-looking planet, Sean decided, the weather was exceedingly cold, striking at his flesh and bones like tiny needles.

The Kraks herded the long line of humans through the airlock out onto the huge expanse of the space port. There were thousands of ship cradles, it seemed, and they were packed with other ships unloading their cargo. As far as his green eyes could see, Sean recognized only human beings—thousands of them moving single file out of the maws of the swollen Krak ships. Those files were converging at a huge gate at the far end of the port.

They looked, Sean thought, like long lines of ants moving toward their hill.

Then he, too, was moving toward the same gate.

Perhaps only he, of those thousands, was different. For he was not squeezed into the line. The human ahead of him and the human behind were a good four feet from him, as if keeping as far from a carrier of the plague as possible.

Sean grinned wryly. He kept his eyes fixed ahead where black buildings shoved their coarse heavy structures against the lowering scarlet sky.

They moved through the mammoth portal at last, and finally Sean was swept into the mass of humans who clogged the way. They stumbled through the black block-paved streets and the few Kraks who were on the street gave those humans only cursory glances.

Nothing new to them, Sean thought grimly. And the urgency of his conviction that these Kraks could be destroyed put buoyancy in his step and set his mind to working frantically. He towered above the other humans around him, his flame-hair blazing like a torch.

A Krak saw that flame head. Sean didn't know it then, but he learned shortly.

Finally those thousands of humans were herded into an open-air compound, surrounded by heavy, black stone walls that lifted breathtakingly above them. Other humans were there, men bearded and filthy, women, even in their despair, trying to keep some semblance of beauty.

The clothes of these older prisoners were almost gone, only that metal contrivance on their backs shone brightly. Many of the children, even in the cold of Karrar, moved about listlessly, naked. Sean counted seven fist and kick fights going on in the compound as he entered.

Much of the decency of man had been destroyed by the Kraks; there seemed no joy, no laughter, no comradeship, only an all-pervading air of despair. That light of intelligence had left many a human's eyes in that inclosure to be replaced by a blank stare.

SEAN shuddered a little, and the wry twist came to his mouth. Somehow, he thought, and the coldness of the thought was like a knife of chilled steel, the Kraks must be destroyed and punished for this terrible blow to the dignity of man.

The cold hand of a Krak on his shoulder roused him from his bitter thoughts. He followed the Krak, wonderingly.

The guide and he moved out of the compound, across the black street, pushing through the massed humans who were being poured into the compound, into what was apparently a barracks for warrior Kraks. Through the barracks to a large office at the end they went.

Ralk, the scarlet-kilted Krak, who had engineered his little fiasco with Klash was there. And another Krak, not white-skinned like those on the space ship, but a pastel pink with features less coarse. This Krak was bald, but he wore a long black robe.

Ralk said shortly:

"Red-headed one, you are blessed. Shel Lur has chosen you for her own. Thank your hair, Earthman, that shines like Kar-rar's sun."

There was no expression on Shel Lur's face, but her bald head, painted a darker pink than her skin, inclined.

Sean wondered if the woe-begone expression on his face was apparent to Shel Lur. This—this thing a woman of the Krak race? Sean's lips twisted—no wonder the Kraks looked so gloomy.

Mother of Erin, he would prefer being in the compound than in the company of this huge creature. He said so to Ralk.

Ralk's voice was impassive. "Do not be mistaken, Earthman. Shel Lur does not want you for a husband; but as something to look at." He spoke quickly in his native tongue to Shel Lur. The female Krak nodded, moved toward him.

As Shel Lur's big cold hand seized his arm and steered him out of the door of the office, Sean was, for the first time in twenty-five years of life, not smiling at the events facing him.

IT WASN'T so bad, Sean reflected some weeks later, but it wasn't anything to laugh about—this being doll to a lady of the Kraks. He was fed well, and he slept well, even if it were on the cold black floor.

But he couldn't stand that impassive stare when Shel Lur gazed at him three times a day—once in the morning when she prodded him awake with her foot, once in the afternoon when she brought him down to the dinner table to stare and once in the

evening just before she undressed for the night and lay down on her air pallet.

He had stood it for a week, then he tried to teach her the English language only to find out that she knew enough of it as she wanted. He'd talked to her, trying to describe Earth to her—telling her how different women there were. And she had just nodded and said, "Yess?"

Why in the name of Earth's sun had she picked him out—of every other human? There must have been hundreds of red-heads in the human procession. He looked up at Shel Lur's pink face and said very heatedly:

"Oh, hell . . ."

Shel Lur looked at him impassively.

He had plenty of time to think now and to watch. The picture of the giant Klash ever was with him, that look of pain pricking and tickling at his mind.

Once he asked Shel Lur: "Can't you be killed?"

In her atrociously accented English she said:

"No, I cannot be killed. No Krak ever killed."

"Don't you ever die?"

"Oh, yess. We die."

"How?"

Shel Lur merely shrugged and repeated: "We die." And looked at him impassively.

He liked those rare occasions when she sent him out with the laundry to the section laundry where the humans toiled day and night with the heavy garments. It was good to see your own kind, he thought, even if they are slaves.

Once he tried to lose himself in the city, but an unerring Krak came straight to his hiding spot behind an eating place, lifted him out of his lair, and returned him to Shel Lur.

Shel Lur had not even chided him on his long absence, but had merely looked at him impassively.

This day began differently. Shel Lur woke him by prodding him with her big foot and when he sat up on the cold floor, she pointed, her face a blank:

"See?" she said.

He twisted his aching neck sharply, and almost gasped:

"Marcia! What—how did you get here?"

"Woman," Shel Lur said tonelessly. "Your woman."

Tiny Marcia, her blonde hair awry, her blue eyes frightened, her tiny hands twisting.

Her words stumbled out: "A Krak came; took me from beside Mike in the laundry."

Sean looked from Marcia to Shel Lur.

Shel Lur nodded: "Your woman," she said again.

"No," Sean said, "my friend's woman."

"Yess?" said Shel Lur. "Your woman, I say it." She took Marcia by the arm, pushed her against Sean. Then she walked out and shut the door.

Sean stood in the center of the room, running his hands through his flame hair.

"I'm damned if I know what she's driving at. Oh, well," he said and shrugged.

He looked at Marcia, commented: "You look better than you did on the ship."

Marcia looked at him, her lips quivering, her eyes brimming with tears:

"Oh, Sean," she said. "What kind of hellish world is this?" Then she threw herself into Sean's arms, her breasts heaving, sobs like tiny pin cushions tearing at her throat.

Awkwardly, Sean patted her shoulder. "Easy, Marcia, easy."

Shel Lur came back in again. Without emotion, she looked at Marcia clasped in Sean's arms, said tonelessly:

"Good. You will not run away again."

Marcia turned her head to stare at the Krak woman. Sean's eyes were thoughtful.

SEAN McKENNA awoke suddenly, jarred from sleep by an almost tangible thought. Half-awake, the fingers of his mind reached into his dream and tried to form it into wakeful reality.

Almost, he thought bitterly. I almost had it. He'd been dreaming about his attempts to destroy a Krak, living it over again, and for a single fleeting moment, he would have sworn he found the chink in the Krak armor of invulnerability. Then it was gone.

Over in the opposite corner, Marcia stirred. Nightmare, probably, but who wouldn't have a nightmare? But that dream, so real and in it he had been so sure

of the Krak's vulnerability. And now that was gone.

He drifted off to sleep again.

When he awakened, he was surprised. It had not been by Shel Lur's dainty hoof. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he turned toward Marcia's corner.

Instantly he was on his feet. She was gone! He darted from the bare room, through the door into Shel Lur's chamber.

Striding into the center of the Krak's sleeping chamber, Sean McKenna halted abruptly, almost as if he had bumped up against an unseen, immovable force.

A woman's laughter, dancing on joyous toes, stopped him. Marcia's laughter! Then his heart froze into a lump of dry ice within his chest. Only for fleeting moments had that laughter been joyous, now it was a mad, maudlin thing, twisted by the frightening fingers of hysteria.

Sean sprinted across the huge sleeping room, blasted through the door of the dressing chamber.

Marcia, her tiny body a limp blob lay on the cold floor, mad laughter dripping from her lips.

Shel Lur sat impassively in the high-backed bench, a wig of human hair fixed on her head, her dark eyes staring at him. Around her neck was a necklace of black triangular shaped stones that winked evilly in the sullen light of the sun.

Sean tried to comfort the sobbing, screaming Marcia, but her soft face was twisted and torn with frightful agony and her tiny red mouth still burred raucous laughter.

Sean turned coldly to Shel Lur.

"What have you done?" he lippled, his green eyes stabbing flame.

Shel Lur stared at him impassively, her wide-lipped mouth lax.

It was then that Sean felt that latent hope for the Krak's vulnerability flare in his heart.

Shel Lur was dead.

His quick mind spun through a million queries. How had she died? Was it a Krak's ordinary death? What had happened to cast the life from her?

Sean looked down at Marcia's contorted, writhing body.

His answer lay there.

With a cold mind, Sean bent down, jerked Marcia roughly to her feet.

His strong palm lashed out, once, twice in snapping blows to Marcia's soft cheeks. The girl whimpered at the first blow; at the second, her sobbing slowed; and at the third, a semblance of intelligence brought a spark to her blue eyes.

SEAN held her shoulders gripped tightly in his hands. He shook her gently.

"Marcia," he said softly. "Marcia."

Marcia's eyes reached up to his. She said dully:

"It was awful, Sean." Then she was in his arms sobbing. Sean let the sobbing run its course, though his mind was championing to ask her what happened. The hysteria was gone from her voice finally when she said:

"I killed her, Sean, with the touch of my hand." She held up the tiny hand with the long tapering fingers and flexed it.

"Marcia." Sean forced himself to speak slowly. "How did you kill her? What spot did you touch?"

He was breathless. He'd been right after all, there was a vulnerable spot on the Krak's invulnerable body. Was it the same spot he'd thought from his battle with Klash?

Marcia spoke quickly: "I don't know, Sean. She woke me, gave me that wig, told me to fix her head like mine. I did it, only I drew two strands of the hair down under her chin and tied it in a bow.

"It didn't look quite right, so I put my hands on her shoulders and drew the bow wider. But it looked so funny under her chin, I laughed and pushed against her to keep from falling."

"Where did you touch her?"

"I don't remember, Sean, I don't remember. Anyway, right then her whole face twisted into awful knots and her throat worked as if she couldn't get enough air to breathe. Her face turned white and then blue and back to pink again.

"Her face, o-o-oh, it was terrible looking and frightened me so much," Marcia pushed closer to Sean, her tiny arms twisted tightly about him.

Sean was unaware of Marcia's warm body pressing against him.

For he was remembering.

It was only a tickle at first, then it grew and bubbled and the laughter pushed Sean's

mouth open. The chink! His mind was shrieking. I've found it!

He laughed until the tears ran down his cheeks. It was the first time in many weeks that Sean McKenna had laughed like that—full-throated and joyous.

Abruptly, he sobered.

"Marcia," he said. "Help me dump Shel Lur into a laundry hamper. We'll have to get her out of here. Get her to where other Earth people, Mike and the rest of them, may see her—a dead Krak. An unkillable, unburnable Krak, dead violently. Then they will listen to me."

Marcia raised puzzled eyes to him.

"But what part of her did I touch to kill her?"

"No time for explanations. Only this much. It's you the Earth should thank for finding the chink in the Krak's armor. The answer was there, but me, I was the guy who couldn't see the trees for the forest."

As he talked, Sean was dragging the tall plastic clothes hamper to the side of the dead Shel Lur.

It strained every muscle of Sean's lean tough body to transfer Shel Lur's bulk from the high-backed bench to the hamper. Marcia brought some soiled clothes that they arranged around Shel Lur's body, doubled up in the hamper.

The thick plastic rollers squeaked under the weight as he worked it to the hallway outside Shel Lur's apartments, Marcia trailing behind him.

The two Krak guards flicked their eyes at them, but remained impassive. It was nothing unusual to see an Earthling delivering clothes to the laundry.

Sean masked the effort as he trundled the hamper by the guards. It might arouse suspicions if they thought he was disclosing undue stress.

He was sweating as he worked the hamper step by step down the long stairway leading to the street. He was desperately afraid that the hamper would overbalance and topple Shel Lur's body out on the landing before the two guards near the main gate. But Marcia strained her tiny body against the hamper, relieving some of the drag.

The Kraks did not even glance at them. Outside with the door closed, Sean straightened, blew a breath of relief through his tight lips.

Of a sudden, Marcia pulled his head, kissed him firmly on the lips. Sean jerked away abruptly.

"Don't you like me?" she asked petulantly. "I like you."

"How about Mike?"

Marcia shrugged. For a moment, Sean wanted to take her tiny body and shake some sense into it; but then he remembered that it was she who had given him the key to the enigma of the Krak's invulnerability.

Trust a woman to find a man's Achilles heel! He grinned wryly, and asked:

"Which way to Mike's laundry?" Marcia pointed, still pouting a little.

MIKE saw them first as they pushed the hamper into the spraying room.

His dark face, the dark hair crowning it like a thick cap, lighted at the sight of Marcia, and harshened when he saw Sean.

Mike moved quickly toward them, his eyes fixed on Marcia's face. His arms were outstretched. Sean was looking at Marcia out of the corner of his green eyes. At Mike's approach she moved closer to Sean, tugged at his arm.

"Marcia!" Mike said, and his voice carried his heart with it. "I was scared stiff when they took you. How . . .?" Mike's dark eyes saw Marcia's fingers flexing on Sean's arm.

He took a step forward, his bulging muscles rippling, his dark eyes snapping. Sean, wordlessly, dumped over the hamper.

Shel Lur's body spilling out on the damp floor stopped him instantly.

Mike O'Hara stared at the body of the Krak, then at Sean's smiling lips.

"Dead." Sean's voice was quiet.

"Dead?"

Their soft voices brought other Earthlings crowding from the various parts of the spraying room. They, too, stared at the dead bulk of the pink-skinned Krak.

"How?" Mike breathed the word like a prayer.

Sean jerked a thumb at Marcia. "Marcia did it, and showed me how."

Marcia broke in: "But I don't know how I did it, Sean."

Sean shrugged as Mike moved closer to Marcia.

"Oh, Marcia," Mike said softly. "You found the way." His arms reached out as if to clasp her, but she ducked under them,

put her arm around Sean's waist.

Sean's fingers pushed her arm loose, but Mike was a fury before him.

"So," Mike growled. "I must think of Jane. I must forget Marcia." He sniffed loudly. "Well, friend, how about Maureen? I suppose she'll greet Marcia with open arms?" He paused a moment.

"I'll come back, Maureen," Mike mimicked Sean's last words to his black-haired Maureen when the Earthlings had first been driven aboard the Krak ship many weeks before.

Then Mike's big fist lashed out. Sean's strong hands reached out, caught the arm, pushed it to Mike's side as he said quietly:

"Easy, Mike, easy." He added: "There are more important things to consider now than jealousy." A movement from Marcia turned Sean's head quickly. Then he smiled that slanted grin.

"Look, Mike, she's just a feather, blown about by what takes her fancy." Sean jerked his flame head at Marcia. She was smiling up at a tall, slim blond—a stranger to Sean who had been hovering in the background.

Mike looked, and the fire in his dark eyes died a little. Muscles worked in the sides of his jaw. His barrel chest lifted in a deep breath. Then he grinned a little shamefacedly.

His voice was abrupt then.

"How did the Krak die, Sean?"

Sean said enigmatically: "By an Earthling's cruelest weapon. A weapon which has been lost to most humans since the Kraks came. A sort of prodigal weapon. I used it once on Klash, and didn't know it. I couldn't see it then. But Marcia's killing Shel Lur gave me the answer."

Sean McKenna took Mike's arm, led him to the door.

They moved outside where two Krak guardsmen stood.

They paced out into the black paved street.

"Watch them," Sean said softly, triumph in his voice.

SEAN McKENNA began to laugh, the deep waves of it pouring up out of his chest, filling the sullen air with its joy. There it was, he thought humbly, the weapon. *Laughter!*

The two Kraks stood impassive. Their

dark eyes were quiet. They were unperturbed.

Sean stopped laughing. His bright green eyes were "dull as he turned to Mike O'Hara.

"It doesn't work," he said. They were just words. There was no emotion in them. He might have been talking about the weather. "I was sure this was it. Laughter. David's sling against Goliath."

Then Sean McKenna shrugged. His voice was flippant now. His green eyes stared at Mike's dark ones unblinkingly. He wondered: Are my eyes as blank and dull as Mike's? He said:

"I could think of the worse places for mankind to die—" he swept his left arm encompassing the red sky and black city—"but not many." He laughed again. This time his voice was high-pitched, almost with a note of hysteria in it.

"You were right, Mike, we didn't have much chance against the Universe Champion."

"Wait!" Mike said urgently. "Look!"

The two Krak guardsmen were staggering drunkenly toward them. This Sean saw as he turned. Their faces were twisted, working convulsively.

"Stop it," the foremost one muttered hoarsely. "It hurts the ears."

His figure towered over Sean, clutching fingers reaching. Sean darted aside. The second Krak had fallen, huge spatulate fingers scrabbling at the black-paved blocks. The first one turned hesitantly as if he could no longer control his feet, stumbled after Sean.

He lunged at Sean, succeeded only in tearing that metal contrivance from his back. A great weight suddenly pulled Sean to the pavement, seemed to triple the weight of his own body. It was pain to move his head, but Sean's red-thatch twisted so his green eyes could see.

The pursuing Krak toppled against the black bricks beside Sean, his bald head making a dull sound. The usually impassive eyes were staring at Sean's green orbs. There was pain and—was it defeat?—in them.

Every sinewy muscle in Sean's body strained as he tried to get to his feet. So that was what the metal pack was for, he decided irrelevantly, an anti-gravity device. He threw his body toward it.

Before he reached it, however, Mike had picked it up, was strapping it haphazardly on his back. The tremendous weight lifted and he crawled to his feet.

"You were right after all," Mike said, and there was a caress in it. "Laughter."

Sean stood a long moment, looking at the fallen Kraks.

Sean began to chuckle, the chuckle drifted into laughter. It was true! Humanity had forgotten its greatest weapon.

"God," said Mike softly. "Laughter did it. Laughter." His dark eyes were staring at Sean. Then he, too, was laughing, joining his bass with Sean's baritone.

EARTHLINGS moved out of the laundry, their eyes wide. They, too, fired by the infectious roarings began to laugh. On the wings of the wind, the laughter spread, working its way building by building, street by street, block by block through the city, as other humans picked it up, flung it on joyfully.

And as the Earthly laughter bubbled and rolled through the sullen city of Karrar, Kraks died—only a few at first, but more and more as the bursts of laughter swelled and swelled until even the black and red stone echoed with it.

Mike O'Hara placed his big hand on Sean McKenna's arm.

"You found the chink, Sean," he said. "Was it the sound of the laughter? That doesn't sound right." He chuckled a little at the unexpected pun.

Sean grinned. "I know what you're driving at, Mike. Laughter is scaled so low on the vibration scale that the Kraks must have encountered other vibrations of the same intensity at many times in the past. That it?"

Mike nodded.

Sean grinned impishly. "Laugh once, Mike, and listen to your laughter." Mike laughed, his brow furrowed.

"No idea bloomed," he said when he stopped laughing.

"Burlesque it," Sean said. "Do it in slow motion." He demonstrated. "Like this. Ha—ha—ha—ha."

"Got it!" Mike exclaimed. "It's not a single sound. It's a series of them. It's the old story of the soldiers crossing the bridge. It's not each individual soldier; it's the cadence. Not ha, but ha—ha—ha."

"Like kicking at the lock of a door instead of pushing on it steadily to get it open; like chipping at a rock instead of trying to smash it with one blow—there's a slough of analogies if we wanted to go on with it."

"That one Krak muttered something about his ears," Mike put in.

Sean nodded. "That, I think, marks the spot of their Achilles heel. They're like us in many ways—but one difference apparently lies in their ears. I'll get old Doc Perkins to dissect some of them.

"My own idea is that their balance canals are constituted differently somehow than ours. Those two Kraks gave all the appearance of being unable to maintain their balance. In us, those ear canals are gyroscopes. That's why even blind persons are aware when they begin to deviate from an upright position.

"Both our canals of balance and those of the Kraks probably function the same way, but the extra gravity of this planet may have wrought the chink which we found. With study and experimentation we should find out for sure just what happens." Sean stopped talking, gazed

at the people around him who were laughing.

He felt his chest swelling with pride. Man was on the road back—back to Earth with its rolling green hills, its blue skies, its brown mountains, its myriad sounds and smells and sights. Man was going home with a weapon to cast out the invader.

He stood for a long time, Mike's hand on his arm, watching these happy humans. Even the black and red of Karrar was softened by the joyous light in their clear unfilmed eyes.

Finally, Sean McKenna said,

"We have a new task, Mike. We've got to take them home."

The sullen red sun dipped behind the black hills. The black mist of night flowed over the lowering sky dimming it, finally enveloping it. The black mist thickened, formed silently into the night sky with its countless planets, its myriad suns.

Somewhere in that star-scattered vastness is Earth, Sean McKenna thought.

Earth. And Maureen with the soft black hair and eyes that are blue flames.

Earth!

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on one of the men you've met in preceding issues—those cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish Planet Stories and the Vizigraph.

So, anyway, this Conway boy thrust his head into our office the other day and said, "I'm sick and tired of the piffle in Feature Flash; you need brawn and guts; I've got guts—so much, in fact, I guess you'd better print this." I listened respectfully, squirmed out of his clutch, and agreed. So here it is, from the guy with guts, the guy who walks where angels fear to tread in the Vizigraph. We want you to know that—

CONWAY CONFESSES

Okay. I'll talk. Born. Didn't like it. Went to church. They threw water on me.

Learned to read. My first big mistake. Went to school. A cinch. Pop was a politician. I caught on. Learned how to get top marks. Without studying. Without doing homework. Just studied teachers.

Took science. Learned whole mess of physical laws. Took me years to forget them. Teacher good guy. Only read stuff called science fiction. Took it up myself to be on right side of him. Second big mistake.

Collected piles of magazines. Started to read letter columns. Funny. Started to write letters. Got mail from people all over world who read science fiction. Mailmen cursed me.

Started going with girls. Third big mistake. Not girls. Just the going with them. Found they wanted to be supported. Ha! Met other jerks who read science fiction. Whole bunch nuts, together. Formed club, made rules, junked rules, made new rules, junked them. Junked club. Mailmen still cursed me. I cursed them back. Kept writing letters, getting letters. Got writer's cramp. Got rid of girls. Stamps took all money. Dad's money.

One day Pop said: get a job. Did.

Went to church again. They chained me to a woman for life. Next time I suppose they'll throw dirt on me.

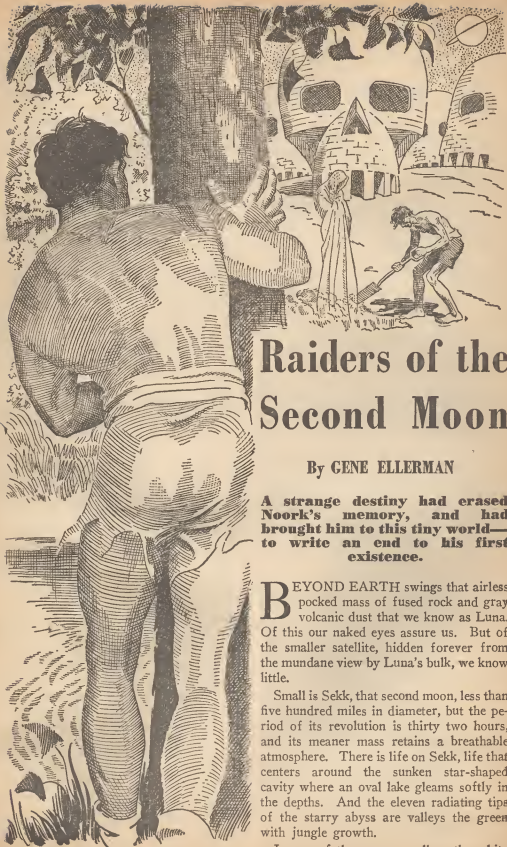
Kept on reading science fiction. Wife did, too. Found I could always go to sleep over science fiction story. Finally got tired of it. Discovered I could sleep without it.

Don't care for science fiction any more. Behind the times. Dull. That's why I read Planet. That's why I enjoy Vizigraph. Full of funny letters from funny people. Good for laugh any day.

Had strange experience recently. Met an editor. Fantastic. Guy named Peacock. Only looks human. Talks human. Can scarcely tell difference.

Okay?

—W. KERMIT CONWAY III.



Raiders of the Second Moon

By GENE ELLERMAN

A strange destiny had erased Noork's memory, and had brought him to this tiny world—to write an end to his first existence.

BYOND EARTH swings that airless pocked mass of fused rock and gray volcanic dust that we know as Luna. Of this our naked eyes assure us. But of the smaller satellite, hidden forever from the mundane view by Luna's bulk, we know little.

Small is Sekk, that second moon, less than five hundred miles in diameter, but the period of its revolution is thirty two hours, and its meaner mass retains a breathable atmosphere. There is life on Sekk, life that centers around the sunken star-shaped cavity where an oval lake gleams softly in the depths. And the eleven radiating tips of the starry abyss are valleys the green with jungle growth.

In one of those green valleys the white savage that the Vasads called Noork

Illustration by DOOLIN

squatted in the ample crotch of a jungle giant and watched the trail forty feet below. For down there moved alertly a golden skinned girl, her only weapons a puny polished bow of yellow wood and a sheathed dagger.

Sight of the girl's flowing brown hair and the graceful feminine contours of her smooth-limbed body beneath its skin-halter and the insignificant breech-clout, made his brow wrinkle with concentration. Not forever had he lived in this jungle world of valleys and ragged cliffs. Since he had learned the tongue of the hairy Vasads of forest, and the tongue of their gold-skinned leader, Gurn, the renegade, he had confirmed that belief.

For a huge gleaming bird had carried him in its talons to the top of the cliff above their valley and from the rock fire had risen to devour the great bird. Somehow he had been flung clear and escaped the death of the mysterious bird-thing. And in his delirium he had babbled the words that caused the apish Vasads to name him Noork. Now he repeated them aloud.

"New York," he said, "good ol' New York."

The girl heard. She looked upward fearfully, her rounded bare arm going back to the bow slung across her shoulder. Swiftly she fitted an arrow and stepped back against the friendly bole of a shaggy barked jungle giant. Noork grinned.

"Tako, woman," he greeted her.

"Tako," she replied fearfully. "Who speaks to Tholon Sarna? Be you hunter or escaped slave?"

"A friend," said Noork simply. "It was I who killed the spotted *narl* last night when it attacked you."

Doubtfully the girl put away her bow. Her fingers, however, were never far from the hilt of her hunting dagger.

Noork swung outward from his perch, and then downward along the ladder of limbs to her side. The girl exclaimed at his brown skin.

"Your hair is the color of the sun!" she said. "Your garb is Vasad, yet you speak the language of the true men." Her violet oddly slanting eyes opened yet wider. "Who are you?"

"I am Noork," the man told her. "For many days have I dwelt among the wild

Vasads of the jungle with their golden-skinned chief, Gurn, for my friend."

The girl impulsively took a step nearer. "Gurn!" she cried. "Is he tall and strong? Has he a bracelet of golden discs linked together with human hair? Does he talk with his own shadow when he thinks?"

"That is Gurn," admitted Noork shortly. "He is also an exile from the walled city of Grath. The city rulers call him a traitor. He has told me the reason. Perhaps you know it as well?"

"Indeed I do," cried Sarna. "My brother said that we should no longer make slaves of the captured Zurans from the other valleys.

Noork smiled. "I am glad he is your brother," he said simply.

The girl's eyes fell before his admiring gaze and warm blood flooded into her rounded neck and lovely cheeks.

"Brown-skinned one!" she cried with a stamp of her shapely little sandalled foot. "I am displeased with the noises of your tongue. I will listen to it no more."

But her eyes gave the provocative lie to her words. This brown-skinned giant with the sunlit hair was very attractive. . . .

THE GIRL was still talking much later, as they walked together along the game-trail. "When my captors were but one day's march from their foul city of Bis the warriors of the city of Konto, through whose fertile valley we had journeyed by night, fell upon the slavers.

"And in the confusion of the attack five of us escaped. We returned toward the valley of Grath, but to avoid the intervening valley where our enemies, the men of Konto, lived, we swung close to the Lake of Uzdon. And the Misty Ones from the Temple of the Skull trailed us. I alone escaped."

Noork lifted the short, broad-bladed sword that swung in its sheath at his belt and let it drop back into place with a satisfying whisper of flexible leather on steel. He looked toward the east where lay the mysterious long lake of the Misty Ones.

"Some day," he said reflectively, "I am going to visit the island of the unseen evil beings who stole away your friends. Perhaps after I have taken you to your brother's hidden village, and from there

to your city of Grath. . .” He smiled.

The girl did not answer. His keen ears, now that he was no longer speaking, caught the scuffling of feet into the jungle behind him. He turned quickly to find the girl had vanished, and with an instinctive reflex of motion he flung himself to one side into the dense wall of the jungle. As it was the unseen club thudded down along his right arm, numbing it so he felt nothing for some time.

One armed as he was temporarily, and with an unseen foe to reckon with, Noork awkwardly swung up into the comparative safety of the trees. Once there, perched in the crotch of a mighty jungle monarch, he peered down at the apparently empty stretch of sunken trail beneath.

At first he saw nothing out of the ordinary. Apparently there was no stir of life along that leaf-shadowed way. And then he caught a glimpse of blurring shadowy shapes, blotches of cottony mist that blended all too well with the foliage. One of the things from the island in the Lake of Uzdun moved, and he saw briefly the bottom of a foot dirtied with the mud of the trail.

Noork squinted. So the Misty Ones were not entirely invisible. Pain was growing in his numbed arm now, but as it came so came strength. He climbed further out on the great branch to where sticky and overripe fruit hung heavy. With a grin he locked his legs upon the forking of the great limb and filled his arms with fruit.

A barrage of the juicy fruit blanketed the misty shapes. Stains spread and grew. Patchy outlines took on a new color and sharpness. Noork found that he was pelting a half-dozen hooded and robed creatures whose arms and legs numbered the same as his own, and the last remnant of superstitious fear instilled in his bruised brain by the shaggy Vasads vanished.

These Misty Ones were living breathing creatures like himself! They were not gods, or demons, or even the ghostly servants of demons. He strung his bow quickly, the short powerful bow that Gurn had given him, and rained arrows down upon the cowering robed creatures.

And the monsters fled. They fled down the trail or faded away into the jungle. All but one of them. The arrow had pierced

a vital portion of this Misty One's body. He fell and moved no more.

A moment later Noork was ripping the stained cloak and hood from the fallen creature, curious to learn what ghastly brute-thing hid beneath them. His lip curled at what he saw.

The Misty One was almost like himself. His skin was not so golden as that of the other men of Zuran, and his forehead was low and retreating in a bestial fashion. Upon his body there was more hair, and his face was made hideous with swollen colored scars that formed an irregular design. He wore a sleeveless tunic of light green and his only weapons were two long knives and a club.

“So,” said Noork, “the men of the island prey upon their own kind. And the Temple of Uzdun in the lake is guarded by cowardly warriors like this.”

Noork shrugged his shoulders and set off at a mile-devouring pace down the game trail toward the lake where the Temple of the Skull and its unseen guardians lay. Once he stopped at a leaf-choked pool to wash the stains from the dead man's foggy robe.

The jungle was thinning out. Noork's teeth flashed as he lifted the drying fabric of the mantle and donned it.



Noork

UD TASTED the scent of a man and sluggishly rolled his bullet head from shoulder to shoulder as he tried to catch sight of his ages-old enemy. For between the hairy quarter-ton beast men of the jungles of Sekk and the golden men of the valley cities who enslaved them there was eternal war.

A growl rumbled deep in the hairy half-man's chest. He could see no enemy and yet the scent grew stronger with every breath.

"You hunt too near the lake," called a voice. "The demons of the water will trap you."

Ud's great nostrils quivered. He tasted the odor of a friend mingled with that of a strange Zuran. He squatted.

"It's Noork," he grunted. "Why do I not see you?"

"I have stolen the skin of a demon," answered the invisible man. "Go to Gurn. Tell him to fear the demons no longer. Tell him the Misty Ones can be trapped and skinned."

"Why you want their skins?" Ud scratched his hairy gray skull.

"Go to save Gurn's . . ." and here Noork was stumped for words. "To save his father's woman woman," he managed at last. "Father's woman woman called Sarna."

And the misty blob of nothingness was gone again, its goal now the marshy lowlands that extended upward perhaps a thousand feet from the jungle's ragged fringe to end at last in the muddy shallows of the Lake of Uzdun.

To Noork it seemed that all the world must be like these savage jungle fastnesses of the twelve valleys and their central lake. He knew that the giant bird had carried him from some other place that his battered brain could not remember, but to him it seemed incredible that men could live elsewhere than in a jungle valley.

But Noork was wrong. The giant bird that he had ridden into the depths of Sekk's fertile valleys had come from a far different world. And the other bird, for which Noork had been searching when he came upon the golden-skinned girl, was from another world also.

The other bird had come from space several days before that of Noork, the Vasads had told him, and it had landed somewhere

within the land of sunken valleys. Perhaps, thought Noork, the bird had come from the same valley that had once been his home. He would find the bird and perhaps then he could remember better who he had been.

So it was, ironically enough, that Stephen Dietrich—whose memory was gone completely—again took up the trail of Doctor Karl Von Mark, last of the Axis criminals at large. The trail that had led the red-haired young American flier from rebuilding Greece into Africa and the hidden valley where Doctor Von Mark worked feverishly to restore the crumbled structure of Nazidom, and then had sent him hurtling spaceward in the second of the Doctor's crude space-ships was now drawing to an end. The Doctor and the young American pilot were both trapped here on this little blob of cosmic matter that hides beyond the Moon's cratered bulk.

The Doctor's ship had landed safely on Sekk, the wily scientist preferring the lesser gravity of this fertile world to that of the lifeless Moon in the event that he returned again to Earth, but Dietrich's spacer had crashed.

Two words linked Noork with the past, the two words that the Vasads had slurred into his name: New York. And the battered wrist watch, its crystal and hands gone, were all that remained of his Earthly garb.

NOORK PADDED the long flat dugout strongly away from the twilight shore toward the shadowy loom of the central island. Though he could not remember ever having held a paddle before he handled the ungainly blade well.

After a time the clumsy prow of the craft rammed into a yielding cushion of mud, and Noork pulled the dugout out of the water into the roofing shelter of a clump of drooping trees growing at the water's edge.

Sword in hand he pushed inward from the shore and ended with a smothered exclamation against an unseen wall. Trees grew close up to the wall and a moment later he had climbed out along a horizontal branch beyond the wall's top, and was lowering his body with the aid of a braided leather rope to the ground beyond.

He was in a cultivated field his feet and

hands told him. And perhaps half a mile away, faintly illumined by torches and red clots of bonfires, towered a huge weathered white skull!

Secure in the knowledge that he wore the invisible robes of a Misty One he found a solitary tree growing within the wall and climbed to a comfortable crotch. In less than a minute he was asleep.

"The new slave," a rough voice cut across his slumber abruptly, "is the daughter of Tholon Dist the merchant."

Noork was fully awake now. They were speaking of Sarna. Her father's name was Tholon Dist. It was early morning in the fields of the Misty Ones and he could see the two golden-skinned slaves who talked together beneath his tree.

"That matters not to the priests of Uzdon," the slighter of the two slaves, his hair almost white, said. "If she be chosen for the sacrifice to great Uzdon her blood will stain the altar no redder than another's."

"But it is always the youngest and most beautiful," complained the younger slave, "that the priests chose. I wish to mate with a beautiful woman. Tholon Sarna is such a one."

The old man chuckled dryly. "If your wife be plain," he said, "neither master nor fellow slave will steal her love. A slave should choose a good woman—and ugly, my son."

"Some night," snarled the slave, "I'm going over the wall. Even the Misty Ones will not catch me once I have crossed the lake."

"Silence," hissed the white-haired man. "Such talk is madness. We are safe here from wild animals. There are no spotted narls on the island of Manak. The priests of most holy Uzdon, and their invisible minions, are not unkind."

"Get at your weeding of the field, Rold," he finished, "and I will complete my checking of the gardens."

Noork waited until the old man was gone before he descended from the tree. He walked along the row until he reached the slave's bent back, and he knew by the sudden tightening of the man's shoulder muscles that his presence was known. He looked down and saw that his feet made clear-cut depressions in the soft rich soil of the field.

"Continue to work," he said to the young man. "Do not be too surprised at what I am about to tell you, Rold." He paused and watched the golden man's rather stupid face intently.

"I am not a Misty One," Noork said. "I killed the owner of this strange garment I wear yesterday on the mainland. I have come to rescue the girl, Tholon Sarna, of whom you spoke."

Rold's mouth hung open but his hard blunt fingers continued to work. "The Misty Ones, then," he said slowly, "are not immortal demons!" He nodded his long-haired head. "They are but men. They too can die."

"If you will help me, Rold," said Noork, "to rescue the girl and escape from the island I will take you along."

Rold was slow in answering. He had been born on the island and yet his people were from the valley city of Konto. He knew that they would welcome the news that the Misty Ones were not demons. And the girl from the enemy city of Grath was beautiful. Perhaps she would love him for helping to rescue her and come willingly with him to Konto.

"I will help you, stranger," he agreed.

"Then tell me of the Skull, and of the priests, and of the prison where Tholon Sarna is held."

The slave's fingers flew. "All the young female slaves are caged together in the pit beneath the Skull. When the sun is directly overhead the High Priest will choose one of them for sacrifice to mighty Uzdon, most potent of all gods. And with the dawning of the next day the chosen one will be bound across the altar before great Uzdon's image and her heart torn from her living breast." The slave's mismatched eyes, one blue and the other brown, lifted from his work.

"Tholon Sarna is in the pit beneath the Temple with the other female slaves. And the Misty Ones stand guard over the entrance to the temple pits."

"It is enough," said Noork. "I will go to rescue her now. Be prepared to join us as we return. I will have a robe for you if all goes well."

"If you are captured," cried Rold nervously, "you will not tell them I talked with you?"

Noork laughed. "You never saw me," he told the slave.

THE SKULL was a gigantic dome of shaped white stone. Where the eye-sockets and gaping nose-hole should have been, black squares of rock gave the illusion of vacancy. Slitted apertures that served for windows circled the grisly whiteness of the temple's curving walls at three distinct levels.

Noork drifted slowly up the huge series of long bench-like steps that led up to the gaping jaws of the Skull. He saw red and purple-robed priests with nodding head-dresses of painted plumes and feathers climbing and descending the stairs. Among them moved the squatly gnarled shapes of burdened Vasads, their shaggy bowed legs fettered together with heavy copper or bronze chains, and cringing golden-skinned slaves slipped furtively through the press of the brilliant-robed ones. The stale sweaty odor of the slaves and the beast men mingled with the musky stench of the incense from the temple.

Other misty blobs, the invisible guards of the ghastly temple, were stationed at regular intervals across the great entrance into the Skull's interior, but they paid Noork no heed. To them he was another of their number.

He moved swiftly to cross the wide stone-slabbled entry within the jaws, and a moment later was looking down into a sunken bowl whose rocky floor was a score of feet below where he stood. Now he saw the central raised altar where the gleam of precious stones and cunningly worked metal—gold, silver and brass—vied with the faded garish colors of the draperies beneath it. And on the same dais there loomed two beast-headed stone images, the lion-headed god a male and the wolf-headed shape a female.

These then were the two blood hungry deities that the men of Zura worshipped—mighty Uzdon and his mate, Lornu!

Noork joined the descending throng that walked slowly down the central ramp toward the altar. As he searched for the entrance to the lower pits his eyes took in the stone steps that led upward into the two upper levels. Only priests and the vague shapelessness of the Misty Ones climbed those steps. The upper levels,

then, were forbidden to the slaves and common citizens of the island.

As he circled the curving inner wall a foul dank odor reached his sensitive nostrils, and his eyes searched for its origin. He found it there just before him, the opening that gave way to a descending flight of clammy stone steps. He darted toward the door and from nowhere two short swords rose to bar his way.

"None are to pass save the priests," spoke a voice from nowhere gruffly. "The High Priest knows that we of the temple guards covet the most beautiful of the slave women, but we are not to see them until the sacrifice is chosen."

Noork moved backward a pace. He grumbled something inaudible and drew his sword. Before him the two swords slowly drew aside.

In that instant Noork attacked. His keen sword, whetted to razor sharpness on abrasive bits of rock, bit through the hidden neck and shoulder of the guard on his right hand, and with the same forward impetus of attack he smashed into the body of the startled guard on his left.

His sword had wrenched from his hand as it jammed into the bony structure of the decapitated Misty One's shoulder, and now both his hands sought the throat of the guard. The unseen man's cry of warning gurgled and died in his throat as Noork clamped his fingers shut upon it, and his shortened sword stabbed at Noork's back.

The struggle overbalanced them. They rolled over and over down the shadowy stair, the stone smashing at their softer flesh unmercifully. For a moment the battling men brought up with a jolt as the obstruction of the first guard's corpse arrested their downward course, and then they jolted and jarred onward again from blood-slippery step to blood-slippery step.

The sword clattered from the guardian Misty One's clutch and in the same instant Noork's steel fingers snapped the neck of the other man with a pistol-like report. The limp body beneath him struggled no more. He sprang to his feet and became aware of a torch-lighted doorway but a half-dozen paces further down along the descending shaft of steps.

In a moment, he thought, the fellows of this guard would come charging out, swords in hand. They could not have failed to

hear the struggle on the stairs of stone, he reasoned, for here the noise and confusion of the upper temple was muted to a murmur.

So it was that he ran quickly to the door, in his hand the sword that had dropped from the dead man's fingers, and sprang inside, prepared to battle there the Misty Ones, lest one escape to give the alarm.

He looked about the narrow stone-walled room with puzzled eyes. Two warriors lay on a pallet of straw, one of them emitting hideous gurgling sounds that filled the little room with unpleasing echoes. Noork grinned.

From the floor beside the fatter of the two men, the guard who did not snore, he took a club. Twice he struck and the gurgling sound changed to a steady deep breathing. Noork knew that now the two guards would not give the alarm for several hours. Thoughtfully he looked about the room. There were several of the hooded cloaks hanging from pegs wedged into the crevices of the chamber's wall, their outlines much plainer here in the artificial light of the flickering torch.

Noork shed his own blood-stained robe quickly and donned one of the others. The cloaks were rather bulky and so he could carry but two others, rolled up, beneath his own protective covering.

The matter of his disguise thus taken care of he dragged the two bodies from the stairway and hid them beneath their own fouled robes in the chamber of the sleeping guards. Not until then did he hurry on down the stone steps toward the prison pit where Tholon Sarna, the golden girl, was held prisoner.

THE STEPS opened into a dimly lit cavern. Pools of foul black water dotted the uneven floor and reflected back faintly the light of the two sputtering torches beside the entrance. One corner of the cavern was walled off, save for a narrow door of interlocking brass strips, and toward this Noork made his way.

He stood beside the door. "Sarna," he called softly, "Tholon Sarna."

There were a score of young women, lately captured from the mainland by the Misty Ones, sitting dejectedly upon the

foul dampness of the rotting grass that was their bed. Most of them were clad in the simple skirt and brief jacket, reaching but to the lower ribs, that is the mark of the golden people who dwell in the city-states of Zura's valleys, but a few wore a simple band of cloth about their hips and confined their breasts with a strip of well-cured leopard or antelope hide.

One of the women now came to her feet and as she neared the metal-barred entrance Noork saw that she was indeed Sarna. He examined the outer lock of the door and found it to be barred with a massive timber and the timber locked in place with a metal spike slipped into a prepared cavity in the prison's rocky wall.

"It is Noork," he said softly as she came closer. He saw her eyes go wide with fear and sudden hope, and then reached for the spike.

"The priest," hissed the girl.

Noork had already heard the sound of approaching feet. He dropped the spike and whirled. His sword was in his hand as though by magic, as he faced the burly priest of the Skull.

Across the forehead and upper half of the priest's face a curved shield of transparent tinted material was fastened. Noork's eyes narrowed as he saw the sword and shield of the gigantic holy man.

"So," he said, "to the priests of Uzdon we are not invisible. You do not trust your guards, then."

The priest laughed. "We also have robes of invisibility," he said, "and the sacred window of Uzdon before our eyes." He snarled suddenly at the silent figure of the white man. "Down on your knees, guard, and show me your face before I kill you!"

Noork raised his sword. "Take my hood off if you dare, priest," he offered.

The burly priest's answer was a bellow of rage and a lunge forward of his sword arm. Their swords clicked together and slid apart with the velvety smoothness of bronze on bronze. Noork's blade bit a chunk from the priest's conical shield, and in return received a slashing cut that drew blood from left shoulder to elbow.

The fighting grew more furious as the priest pressed the attack. He was a skilled swordsman and only the superior agility of the white man's legs kept Noork away

from that darting priestly blade. Even so his robe was slashed in a dozen places and blood reddened his bronzed body. Once he slipped in a puddle of foul cavern water and only by the slightest of margins did he escape death by the priest's weapon.

The priest was tiring rapidly, however. The soft living of the temple, and the rich wines and over-cooked meats that served to pad his paunch so well with fat, now served to rob him of breath. He opened his mouth to bawl for assistance from the guard, although it is doubtful whether any sound could have penetrated up into the madhouse of the main temple's floor, and in that instant Noork flipped his sword at his enemy.

Between the shield and the transparent bit of curving material the sword drove, and buried itself deep in the priest's thick neck. Noork leaped forward; he snatched the tinted face shield and his sword, and a moment later he had torn the great wooden timber from its sockets.

Tholon Sarna stumbled through the door and he caught her in his arms. Hurriedly he loosed one of the two robes fastened about his waist and slipped it around her slim shivering shoulders.

"Are there other priests hidden here in the pits?" Noork asked tensely.

"No," came the girl's low voice, "I do not think so. I did not know that this priest was here until he appeared behind you." A slow smile crossed Noork's hidden features. "His robe must be close by," he told the girl. "He must have been stationed here because the priests feared the guards might spirit away some of the prisoners."

Slowly he angled back and forth across the floor until his foot touched the soft material of the priest's discarded robe near the stairway entrance. He slipped the thongs of the transparent mask, called by the priest "Uzdon's window" over his hood, and then proceeded to don the new robe.

"My own robe it slit in a dozen places," he explained to the girl's curious violet eyes—all that was visible through the narrow vision slot of her hood. He finished adjusting the outer robe and took the girl's hand.

"Come," he said, "let us escape over the wall before the alarm is given."

WITHOUT incident they reached the field where Rold toiled among the rows of vegetables. Another slave was working in a nearby field, his crude wooden plow pulled by two sweating Vasads, but he was not watching when Rold abruptly faded from view.

Noork was sweating with the weight of two cloaks and the airlessness of the vision shield as they crossed the field toward his rope, but he had no wish to discard them yet. The tinted shield had revealed that dozens of the Misty Ones were stationed about the wall to guard against the escape of the slaves.

They came to the wall and to Noork's great joy found the rope hanging as he had left it. He climbed the wall first and then with Rold helping from below, drew Sarna to his side. A moment later saw the three of them climbing along the limb to the bole of the tree and so to the jungle matted ground outside the wall.

"Will we hide here in the trees until night?" asked the girl's full voice.

Noork held aside a mossy creeper until the girl had passed. "I think not," he said. "The Misty Ones are continually passing from the island to the shore. We are Misty Ones to any that watch from the wall. So we will paddle boldly across the water."

"That is good," agreed the slave, "unless they see us put out from the shore. Their two landing stages are further along the beach, opposite the Temple of Uzdon."

"Then we must hug to the shore until we pass the tip of the island," said Noork thoughtfully. "In that way even if they detect us we will have put a safe distance between us."

Shortly after midday Noork felt the oozy slime of the marshy lowlands of the mainland beneath his paddle and the dugout ran ashore in the grassy inlet for which they had been heading. His palms were blistered and the heavy robes he yet wore were soaked with sweat.

"Once we reach the jungle," he told the girl, "off come these robes. I am broiled alive."

Suddenly Noork froze in his tracks. He thrust the girl behind him. "Misty Ones!" he hissed to Rold. "They crouch among the reeds. They carry nets and clubs to trap us."

Rold turned back toward the boat with Noork and Sarna close at his heels. But the Misty Ones were upon them and by sheer numbers they bore them to the ground. Noork's mightier muscles smashed more than one hooded face but in the end he too lay smothered beneath the nets and bodies of the enemy.

A misty shape came to stand beside these three new captives as they were stripped of their robes. His foot nudged at Noork's head curiously and a guttural voice commanded the shield be removed. Then his voice changed—thickened—as he saw the features of Noork.

"So," he barked in a tongue that should have been strange to Noork but was not, "it is the trapper's turn to be trapped, eh Captain Dietrich?"

A FAT, square-jawed face, harsh lines paralleling the ugly blob of a nose, showed through the opened robe of the leader. The face was that of Doctor Von Mark the treacherous Nazi scientist that Stephen Dietrich had trailed across space to Sekk! But Noork knew nothing of that chase. The man's face seemed familiar, and hateful, but that was all he remembered.

"I see you have come from the island," said the Doctor. "Perhaps you can tell me the secret of this invisible material I wear. With the secret of invisibility I, Karl Von Mark, can again conquer Earth and make the Fatherland invincible."

"I do not understand too well," said Noork hesitantly. "Are we enemies? There is so much I have forgotten." He regarded the brutal face thoughtfully.

"Perhaps you know from what valley the great bird brought me," he said. "Or perhaps the other bird brought you here."

Von Mark's blue eyes widened and then he roared with a great noise that was intended to be mirth. His foot slammed harder into Noork's defenseless ribs.

"Perhaps you have forgotten, swine of an American," he roared suddenly, and in his hand was an ugly looking automatic. He flung back his robe and Noork saw the dress uniform of a general. "Perhaps," the scientist repeated, "but I will take no

chances. The amnesia is often but a pretense."

His lip curled. "This is something for you to remember, Captain Dietrich," he said as the ugly black muzzle of the gun centered on Noork's bronzed chest.

And then Doctor Von Mark cursed as the gun dropped from his nerveless fingers and his hands clawed weakly at the arrow buried in his wide belly. He stumbled backward.

Arrows rained from the mistiness that had closed in about Von Mark and his men. The men from Wari, their faces unshielded, fell like flies. In a moment those yet alive had taken to their heels, and Noork felt invisible fingers tearing at the nets that bound him.

As he rose to his feet the robed figure let its misty covering drop aside. A handsome golden-skinned warrior stood revealed.

"Gurn!" cried Noork.

A glad cry came from the throat of Tholon Sarna as she saw her brother. And then she crept closer to Noork's side as the invisible mantles of Gurn's loyal Vasads opened to reveal the hairy beast men they concealed. Rold whimpered fearfully.

"The message that Ud carried to me was good," laughed Gurn. "The Misty Ones skin easily. We were trapping the Misty Ones as they came across the lake," he looked at the dying Von Mark, "as were these others. Soon we would have come to your rescue, Noork, my friend."

"Lucky I escaped first," Noork told him. "The priests of Uzdun would have trapped you. To them the Misty Ones are visible."

He picked up the fallen vision shield that lay beside their feet. His chest expanded proudly.

"No longer," he told Gurn, "am I a man without a name. I am Captain Dietrich from a distant valley called America. I was hunting this evil man when my bird died."

He smiled and his brown arm tightened around Sarna's golden body. "The evil man is dead. My native valley is safe. Now I can live in peace with you, Gurn, and with your sister, here in the jungle."

"It is good, Noork," smiled Tholon Sarna.

Round 'n Round With The Ringers

THE RINGERS WERE FIRST TO SET FOOT ON THE PLANET "HELLSFIRE"—

—AND THE COOL, WOODED "AVENUTHER".



"NUTS! THE ONLY SHADE TREE ON THIS HELLISH PLANET HAS TO BE CHASED!!"



"IT'S ONE END OF A GIANT EARTHWORM, BUT I DON'T KNOW WHICH END....."

MODERN TRANSPORTATION FOLLOWED IN THEIR FOOTSTEPS...



"BEEN WAITIN' LONG?"



"PLEASE!! STEP TO THE REAR OF THE BUS!! PULL-EASE!!"

UNCLE CLUD BUILT KETTLE-BRITCHES FROM A SECOND HAND RADIO, A WASHING MACHINE AND THE BALANCE FROM A PAIR OF SCALES FOR GOOD MEASURE.

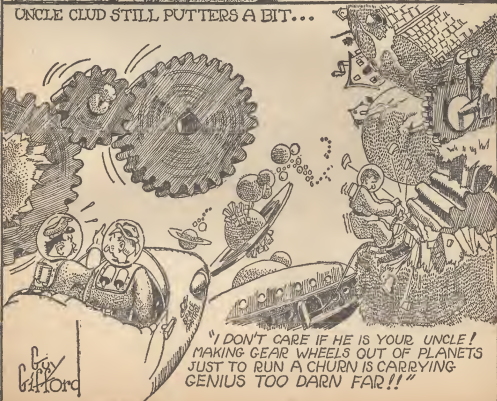


"STOP TICKLING!!"



"WE BETTER GRIND KETTLEBRITCHES VALVES, CLUD, OR THE FINANCE PEOPLE WILL REPOSSSESS HIM NEXT TRIP!!"

UNCLE CLUD STILL PUTTERS A BIT...



"I DON'T CARE IF HE IS YOUR UNCLE! MAKING GEAR WHEELS OUT OF PLANETS JUST TO RUN A CHURN IS CARRYING GENIUS TOO DARN FAR!!"

by
Gifford



Spider Men of Gharr

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

Illustrated by CLYNE

Kimball Trent was the last hope of a ravaged Earth, for locked in his mind were secrets that would bring freedom to the Barbs. He lacked but one thing to release the power of those secrets—the key to the riddle of the blue monsters who could not die.

AT FIRST there was only the cold, the Stygian inky iciness that held every muscle of his body in thrall and made his thoughts flow with the turgid slowness of treacly molasses. He could

not open his eyes, nor could he move; and his mind slipped back into the darkness time and time again. He tried to think of who he was, or *what* he was, and there was no knowledge in his brain.



RONALD CEYNE

Trent fired three feet above the Charrian's head,

And then the heat came through to him, biting into his numbed flesh with the bitter sharpness of a naked yellow flame, drawing life to all his body, pressing back some of the velvet shadows from his mind.

"Kim," he thought dazedly. "I'm Kim."

And then his mind blanked out again, for how long, he did not know. But when he came to, he could open his eyes and see the faintest glimmer of sunlight coming through the split and ruptured earth, tiny dust motes floating in the golden streak.

"I'm Kim," he thought again, and held onto the memory with a frantic desperation, frightened that it was the only reality he had.

He moved at last, screaming at the agony that surged with every movement, finally rolled into a sitting position. There was but the barest glint of light from the earth fault, and his eyes grew strained as he peered about.

He was in a cave, obviously artificial, for there were shelves loaded with dully-gleaming objects, and man-hewn blocks of stone lay upturned where great strangling roots squirmed into the air like monstrous scaly snakes.

He looked at himself.

His hands were talons now, for the nails were curled and twisted into tangled knots, and the flesh had not the resiliency or the strength to straighten the fingers. He bent his head, watched fabric disintegrate into dust on his emaciated body, then gasped. Great festoons of the dust had not powdered into nothingness, and he recognized that they were the swirls of beard that hung pendant from his chin. He straightened, mind trying to grasp what had happened, and the hair from his head swirled about his shoulders, rippling in undulant waves into the clump of tangled masses that lay at his side.

He tried to swallow, but his throat was dry, his tongue swollen. The terrible cold was still in him, and he shivered agonizingly for seconds. It was then he heard the sound of rilling water close at hand.

He crawled toward the sound, tangling hands and feet in the hair that grew so monstrously from his head, his fingernails scrabbling and clicking together like the whisperings of bare branches before a soft Winter breeze.

"I'm Kim," he thought again, and drank with great slobbering noises from the narrow shallow stream that pierced one wall of the cave and vanished through the opposite.

Thirst slaked, he lay, gasping, like some spent animal, thoughts swelling and unfolding in his mind, creeping unbidden from dark recesses, stealing into the brightness of his consciousness.

"I'm Kim," he thought. "Kimball Trent."

He sat, groaning from the hurt that was in every muscle, methodically broke the twisted fingernails close to his finger tips, permitting his fingers to flex more freely, giving him hands once more instead of paws. He tried to break his heavy hair and beard the same way, but his strength was not enough for that, and he searched for something that would free him of the burden.

HE FOUND the knife almost where he had waked. The plastic haft was pitted with corrosion, and there was but a scrap of the incredibly hard steel left; but with it he managed to hack away his beard and hair, leaving both less than a foot long.

He felt a bit better now, some of the pain easing from his body, the tiny warm breeze slipping through the earth fault touching him and giving life to him in passing.

Standing, moving with agonizing slowness, he staggered toward the source of light, clawed at the sides of the fault. Earth crumbled beneath his hands, dropped about his bare feet. He fought the imbedded rocks, pulled them free, then scratched his way out of the cave, dragging himself into the sunlight, blinking against the radiance.

He lay on the velvety-smooth green grass, breathing deeply, his lean body etched with shadows as though it had received no sustenance for a long time. A redbird watched silently from the clump of green bushes at his side, then hopped fearlessly into cover again, trilling its warbling melody to the sky.

A squirrel chattered inquisitively from the limb of a towering tree, then flicked out of sight with a toss of its bushy tail. The breeze was warm and soothing, and Kimball Trent slept.

HE AWOKE to sunlight again, stretching with the uneasy flexing of an animal, then snapped to awareness with a movement that almost brought him to his feet. Pain gushed through his body in red waves, and he sank back with a stifled groan.

And as though the pain had been a curtain before his brain, it parted, and he could think again.

He looked around, trying to adjust his memories to what he saw. He was in timber, great leafy trees towering over his head, the grass and bushes thick and green upon the ground. He saw the huge monolithic rock directly before him, and his mind could not comprehend what had happened.

Only yesterday there had been no trees; that rock had stood alone in the clearing he had made with axe and saw.

And even the rock had changed. Now the edges were not sharp and angular; now they were softened and worn, like a blocky cake of salt that had stood in the summer rain.

He rose to his feet, went to where the heavy metal door had been. It was gone, covered with soil, the earth matted with grass and flowers. He turned away, panic eating at his heart, walked to the earth fault through which he had burrowed like a worm.

Shuddering, he went into the hole, slipping, scrambling, stood upright in the darkness, adjusting his eyes to the lack of light. He saw the radi-flash on the stony floor, bent and clicked it on. The cone of yellow brilliance went twice about the chamber, came to the wheel that no longer turned before the surge of pressure from water rushing along its underground course.

He bent over it, marvelling at the wear that had come to the plastic hub, remembering how utterly indestructible it was. He allowed his gaze to travel along the refrigerating tubes that spider-webbed the ceiling and walls. They were dry, no longer coated with sheaths of hoar-frost. The air was still cold, though, and he shivered in his nakedness.

Then he saw the broken refrigerating pipe, and full knowledge of what had happened flooded his mind. He had been repairing the pipe, had just taken the first

twist of the nut, when it had exploded in his face, cascading silvery liquid over his entire body—liquid so perfectly heat-absorbent it froze anything and everything within a split second after contact.

Kimball Trent whimpered deep in his throat, appalled at the death that he had escaped by inches. Evidently the liquid had not more than brushed him in passing.

He turned to the shelves, reaching for the cans, kicking aside the heap of hair that touched his foot.

He broke the seal on the first can, placed it aside, feeling the heat burgeoning from the built-in cooking unit. Then he opened other cans, ripping away the plastic seals, gorging himself on the cold soups and ripe succulent vegetables. Partially sated, he opened the heated can, used the knife remnant as a fork with which to feed himself on the preserved beef and beans.

Satisfied, he breached a small cask of water, drank thirstily and avidly; then turned away. The radi-light cut brightness through the dark, and he went along the wall, removing covers from five radi-lights, glad that they were eternal. With shadows driven from the chamber, and with his belly fed, he felt more like a man and less like an animal.

The first door of the underground fortress stuck a bit, and he had to swing his weight against it. The portal swung open in a gushing of damp air, and automatically, he flicked the air-conditioning switch. Far away, deeper in the ground, machinery began to hum, and clean air began forcing out the bad.

Trent clicked on the ceiling lights, staring about the mammoth cavern as though he had never seen it before. It stretched so far away from him that his eyes could make out no details at the far end. Along one side, doors opened into the living quarters where more than ten thousand people were destined to live. Further back were the open kitchens where communal meals would be prepared; and still further back where his eyes could make out no detail were the machine shops where weapons to fight the Gharrians would be conditioned and manufactured.

He was smiling as he looked about; for this was his dream brought to realization by the wealth that had come to him from his father. His money had built this

retreat, his money and the hands of a thousand men. Here, within this man-made cavern, would be the refuge for those people who escaped the ravages of the monsters whose sleek vicious ships had wiped New York and London and Berlin from the face of the Earth.

HE WENT toward the great televisors, wondering how many stations still broadcast news of the holocaust that had come to the world. A frown tightened dark brows when he saw the dust that lay on the floor, became a scowl when he saw how it was heaped before the main receiver. He kicked at the dust, saw the signet ring that had fallen through it.

Bending, Kimball Trent lifted the gold ring, studied it. Doctor Boyliss had worn it the last time they had talked; it was strange that he should find it here.

He sat in the chair, switched on the main televisor, relaxed as warmth came from the screen, color glowing from green into violet, swirling into the indescribable shade of blue that gave the screen its three dimensional depth of focus.

His hand went to the "repeat" switch, flicked it.

"This is Doctor Boyliss speaking for the last time," a familiar voice said tiredly from the speaker, while the screen showed no figure. "I have just escaped from the Gharrians, but the wound I have received is mortal, and I can live but moments." There was only the sound of labored breathing for seconds, then the voice continued.

"Most of the leaders are dead, betrayed by spies; only three of us escaped the Gharrian's last raid. Thompson and Fortney have elected to act as guides for the few of you who might escape the final series of raids. I hope that many of you are listening to these final words of mine.

"Kimball Trent is also dead, frozen to death by an explosion in the Refrigerator Room, Number One; therefore his knowledge must be replaced by the minds of those among you."

A surge of terrible wracking coughing sounded, followed by the sobbing gasps of a man dying of an agonizing wound. Then:

"One final word. Fight the Gharrians, blast them from the face of Earth, drive

them back into hell-space that spawned them. Battle them with every weapon and scheme within your power to use. My blessings upon all of you. Go with God—"

There was only the faintest of thudding sounds, and then silence.

Kimball Trent leaned back in the chair, twisting the ring over and over in his fingers, horror piling upon horror in his mind. His gaze flicked to the perpetual radi-calendar beside the screen, and he read the date, June 9, 2735.

He gasped, knowing now the answer to many things, his mind accepting the thought that he would not believe before, one that he had stifled with all his will because it was no fantastic. He shuddered, gaze racing about the crypt-stillness of the room, and fear knotted the muscles of his heart.

He knew now why his beard and hair had been so uncannily long and why his body had withered and grown emaciated through the passage of what had seemed a few hours. He knew now why the dust had been throughout the room, and he knew why the ring had been in the greater dust pile that lay before the screen.

He knew that he had been held in frozen thrall, had been kept miraculously alive, like a fish frozen in a block of ice, by the instantaneous freezing of his body by the refrigerant. He knew that the primi-



Kimball Trent

tive water-wheel attached to the machinery of the refrigerating room had kept the room at a below zero temperature until it had stopped when the water flow had dropped below the wheel by slow degrees.

Yes, he had the answers to everything now.

This was June 2735—and the accident had befallen him in August 2210.

He had slept in frozen suspended animation for more than five hundred years.

He was alive, and the men and women with whom he had fought the Gharrians were dead and dust for centuries. He was alive, and the refuge he had built had never been used. He was alive—and alone.

II

NINE DAYS had passed since Kimball Trent's awakening. He was more alert now, the flat muscles of his body swelling again because of the rich solid food that he ate to replenish his strength. He had found razors and cream and had shaved, and with scissors he had given his unruly dark mane of hair a close cropping, leaving it only long enough that it did not drop over his eyes.

The nine days had been busy; for he had spent hours at the televisior, trying vainly to pick up any messages that might be sent by enemy or friend. He had found clothing still good in their air-tight lockers, had strapped on a flame gun automatically, still unable to make himself believe that five centuries had passed in the few short moments of eternity that he had been unconscious.

He stood now before the televisior, turning off the visual screen, cutting in the automatic relay that would record any scene or message that came through in his absence. He knew that none would arrive; but there was in his heart something that would not admit total defeat.

He shrugged the small food pack into a more comfortable position on his wide shoulders, lifted the radi-needle gun and looped it from his right shoulder by the sling. Slowly, then with greater determination, he began to walk to the door that led to the refrigerator room.

He entered the room, climbed through the earth fault to the outside, carefully

replacing the camouflage mat he had made to cover the entrance. Standing straight and tall in the warm sunlight, he checked his wrist compass, then paced lightly forward through the trees.

His strength was almost fully returned now, and he walked with the lithe grace of an Indian, slipping through the underbrush and foliage with but the barest of sounds to mark his passing. Light trickled through the trees, caressed his back, brought perspiration to his forehead. His face was hard and grim, and his eyes keen, as he searched the woods about for the slightest of signs that would betoken a hidden watcher.

His shadow walked before him, sliding through other shadows, then standing out bold and deep in the sunlit places. The webbing of his chest harness pressed against the rippling muscles of his flesh, and the flame pistol bounced slightly on his hip with every step.

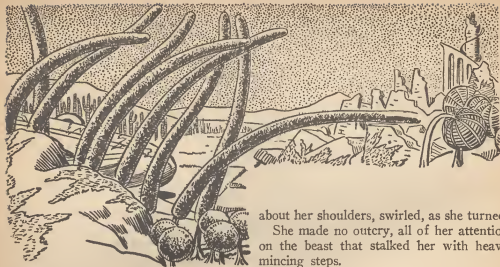
He checked his compass again, then turned due south, cutting through the timber, finding open fields two miles further where the walking was much easier. Rabbits sat in curious wide-eyed watchfulness as he walked through the waving green grass that carpeted the fields, but he gave them no heed, his eyes watching the skies for signs of a crimson ship.

He was a stranger in his native land. Land contours seemed different now, since the timber had come up unheeded. The old roads and paths that he had walked as a boy and man were gone, absorbed through the passing of years. He traveled entirely by compass, swinging to the east after two hours of hard traveling.

The smell of water came to the air, cloying it with dampness, making it somehow fragrant. A hundred yards further, and he was on the bank, gazing across the muddy flood. He turned to his right, and far ahead was New York.

He swore then, cursing in the tight voice of a man who feels a hurt so deeply that it is a physical pain. His hands clenched at his sides, and the muscles of his chest glided upward against the straps.

There was no superb skyline now; gone were the gleaming white spheres and golden columns and blocky marble and plastic shafts that were famous the world over. No smoke hung high in the sky.



over the city; only a few white clouds floated in graceful indifference where great strato-liners had flashed on pinions of gushing rocket flames.

There was a skyline, yes, but it hugged the ground, and it was only the skeleton of the greatest city on earth. Even from where he stood, Kimball Trent could see that buildings had toppled one against the other when the concussion guns of the Gharrians had roared their song of death.

KIMBALL TRENT began to walk with great ground-eating strides. He could see where the supports of the great bridges were on either bank further south; but the spans had been blown away, and he knew that to cross the river would mean swimming or constructing some kind of raft on which to float and paddle.

Instinctively, he unslung his rifle, held it in both hands, the prescience of danger a cold and clammy hand that squeezed his heart and tightened the nerves in his rangy body.

He came to a cut-back, where water had washed a deep gully to the river. He had stepped from the bushes and poised on the edge.

Then he saw the girl.

She was trapped, huddling back against the base of the far wall, slender hands outspread at either side, wide terrified eyes watching the alien monstrosity stalk her with a dreadful calmness. She wore a belted skirt of soft leather, laced sandals and a tight halter of blue leather. Red-gold hair hung in a cloud of brilliance

about her shoulders, swirled, as she turned.

She made no outcry, all of her attention on the beast that stalked her with heavy mincing steps.

Kimball Trent swore softly, lifted his gun, then let it sag in futility. Only too well did he know how invulnerable these Gharrians were to any weapon Earthmen had devised. Radi needles could not penetrate their steel-hard hide, and high-explosives merely bounced them about, apparently doing no damage at all.

They were squat, almost apelike in build, except that they had a double chest, ending in two pairs of arms. A single eye peered lidlessly from the head-like protuberance on the shoulders that made them weirdly humanlike in appearance. Pad feet without toes carried them on legs that had no knee joints. And their skin was the slaty bright blue of sea water thirty feet down.

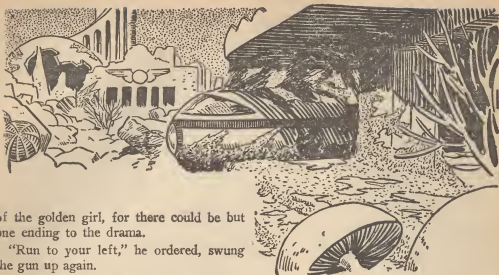
Kimball Trent saw the Gharrian before the girl, and horror was in his eyes. He lifted his rifle automatically again, and hell raved for a brief second as he shot a full clip at the beast. The Gharrian did not turn, apparently did not notice the attack.

But not the girl. She lifted her head, violet eyes widening in features browned by the sun, and her hands make quick gestures.

"Run!" she cried.

The Gharrian plodded forward, multi-fingered hands outspread to take the girl. He gave no heed to the cry, for his race had no speech, and apparently no hearing.

Kimball Trent, cocked the gun to explosives, wondering if he could blow the monster to bloody fragments, then shook his head, knowing that such was impossible. He was held in thrall by the sheer bravery



of the golden girl, for there could be but one ending to the drama.

"Run to your left," he ordered, swung the gun up again.

The girl darted to one side like a flame-haired wraith, going unquestioningly toward the blank end of the gully, pressing against the rocky wall. Her eyes followed every movement of the man on the gully's edge.

And even the Gharrian seemed to sense Trent's presence now; for it turned with a ponderous deadly smoothness, one hand dipping for the square box dangling on a waist cord. Its single eye was as coldly emotionless as that of a cobra.

Kimball Trent fired five times, bracing himself against the concussions, blowing away the center of the cliff that towered twenty feet above the Gharrian's head. And on the fifth shot, even as the monster from outer space began to move with sudden speed for safety, the embankment collapsed, burying him beneath tons of earth.

"Here!" Trent called, but the girl was already running toward him, scrambling up the sloping bank at his side of the gully.

He reached out to give her a hand, and she caught his in a grip that was remarkably strong. Below, noise filled the gully, and dirt blasted upward from the slide. The Gharrian was blowing himself free with his concussor box.

"This way," the girl said, and began to run.

She raced toward the river, scrambled down the bank, going directly toward a large log at the bank. Trent followed, sliding and slipping, beginning to breathe hard from the unaccustomed exertion.

"Wait," he called. "He'll see us swimming."

Then wonder came to his mind; for the girl had bent and swung back the top of the log, showing the interior of a crudely camouflaged canoe. She scrambled into it, beckoning for him to follow, and he stepped in, helped close the lid over their heads.

"We're safe now," the girl breathed, touched a single lever at her head. A slight humming came from somewhere, and motion came to the canoe, and there was the slightest sensation of movement.

KIMBALL TRENT bent his head to one side, peered through a line of tiny holes that pierced the side of the canoe. He grinned tightly, seeing the dirt-clotted figure of the Gharrian come slowly into sight on the river bank. The monster searched the water for a second, then turned and went toward the woods with an implacable slowness that was all the more terrifying because of the utter lack of speed.

Trent looked ahead at the girl, barely making her out in the semi-gloom of the camouflaged canoe. Her eyes were on his features, and they did not waver at his stare.

"Who are you, Barb, that you stand against the Masters, and what manner of weapons are those you carry?" she asked.

Trent shook his head slightly, missing some of the words because of the queer

manner she had in her syllibication and pronunciation. Then he grinned, remembering that this was not the past, and that language would have changed considerably during the five centuries of his enforced entombment.

"I do not know what you mean by 'Barb,'" he said. "My name is Kimball Trent, and the weapons are — well, weapons."

"You speak strangely," the girl said slowly. "Where are you from—Giland, or Connet, or where?"

Trent studied the question for a moment, then understanding came to his eyes. "You mean Long Island and Connecticut?" he asked.

The girl shrugged, brushed soft hair back from a smooth forehead. "Once they were called that, I think," she admitted.

Trent shook his head. "I came from the woods," he said. "Who are you, and how did you get mixed up with that Gharrian?" he finished.

"I am Lura, of the tunnels of York. I was hunting, when the Master trapped me." She smiled, and gratitude was in her voice. "I thank you, Barb," she finished.

"Barb?"

"Of course—Barbarian, Barbar, Barb—whatever you like."

She notched the lever more, and the canoe swayed slightly from the increasing speed, water slapping brightly against the wooden sides. Trent watched her graceful movements, saw the swell of her breasts, the long clean lines of her body.

"So the world is conquered," he mused, half aloud.

Anger came to Lura's fine features, and her hand dropped to the knife at her waist. "I do not like joking about the world," she said stiffly. "The world is not conquered, not while any of us free people live."

Kimball Trent shifted to a more comfortable position. "I meant no joke," he apologized, while thoughts ran with quicksilver speed in his mind. "I do not know," he added. "I fell but a few days ago and hurt my head. I cannot remember many things."

Contrition came to her voice. "The magician will bleed you," she said, "and the reader will heal your mind."

"Magician—Reader?"

Suspicion hardened the girl's voice again, and the knife came clear of the sheath. Her gaze locked with his, and her words came softly one upon the other.

"You know too little and too much," she said. "I think the Elder will talk with you."

Kimball Trent shrugged, relaxed, while the girl sent the canoe through the water. Events were transpiring a little too fast for him, and his mind could not assimilate the facts as fast as they were produced.

People still lived, that was obvious, even though the world had been conquered. But they were not the kind of people he had known. If this girl were representative of her people, then they knew nothing of weapons, that is, the type he had; and in all probability her reference to the magician and the reader meant that they had reverted almost to a primitive form of social life.

He saw no particular reason to trust the slim girl, even though his senses were stirred by her wild liteness. For seconds, he had almost blurted out the knowledge that was his, intending to tell her of the underground cavern. Then caution and common sense came to his mind, and he said nothing, watching her through slitted eyes.

She was conscious of his gaze, of that he was aware. But now suspicion lay in her eyes, and her hand was close to the slim knife at her side, as she guided the slim canoe through the blue water toward the nearing bank.

"Do not move, Barb," the girl said coldly, "else you shall feel my knife in your ribs."

Kimball Trent smiled to himself. "I shall not move," he said evenly. "I know my limitations."

THE CANOE grated against sand, and the girl threw the cover back. Trent blinked in the sunlight, then came to his feet, watched amusedly as the girl gestured with her knife for him to lead the way. Catching up his rifle, he slung it over his shoulder, then stepped from the canoe, watched as she camouflaged it again as a log.

"Through there," she ordered, pointed ahead.

They did not speak, for the time of speaking lay in the future. Behind them, a soulless monster was searching the brush with a blind patience that had conquered a world; and for all they knew he might have signalled more of his kind to come and aid him in his search.

He went ahead, not absolutely certain of where he was, climbing the sloping bank, going toward the edge of the trees ahead. He saw the rustle in the bushes, froze at half-step, hand going to the pistol at his hip.

"Brok!" Lura said softly. "Go back toward the water—slowly, and maybe it will not attack."

But Kimball Trent had his flame gun in his hand now and was going forward, placing each foot carefully, ready for instant action. And on the fourth step, he gasped, felt the blood freeze in his veins.

It came through the bush with the gliding grace of a cat. And it was feline, too, in a way, with the gaping mouth and fangs of a saber-tooth tiger. But there the resemblance ended. Six clawed legs carried it forward, and scales glittered like the skin of a diamondback rattlesnake. Pupilless eyes, like polished red marbles stared unwinkingly, and the hissing sound from the beast's throat was like the escaping of steam.

"Brok," Lura called again. "Do not move, Barb."

But Kimball Trent's hand was already coming up, leveling the flame gun. And even as the gun swung into position, the brok came hurtling forward in a fluid drive of ruthless destruction.

He came squarely into the raving cone of orange flame that gushed from the pistol, came smashing into it, and a scream of agony keened high at the bright blue sky. For nothing alive could withstand the awful violence of that ravening energy; only one creature, the Gharrian, had been able to live through its devouring power.

It died in midleap, and Kimball Trent stepped aside so that its hurtling body would not touch him. He turned the flame on the smouldering corpse, destroyed it with the full power of the gun. Then, grey faced, he looked at Lura.

"What manner of man are you?" she whispered. "You battle the Masters and their stalking broks; you use weapons the like of which I have never heard. Are you a God?"

Trent smiled, shaken a bit by the sincere simplicity of the girl's question, then shook his head.

"I am a man," he answered gently. "Now let us go and talk with the one you call 'the Elder.'"

Lura looked at the knife still gripped in her fingers, and a flush of color tided upward from her throat when her gaze went to the two guns carried by Trent. Wordlessly, she sheathed the blade.

She led the way now, going into the thickest part of the timber, gliding through the most tangled of the thickets with a careless familiar grace. Kimball Trent followed more clumsily, tripping despite his natural skill, scratching himself on sharp brambles. Minutes flicked away, grew into an hour, and he knew that he was approaching the city. They crossed roads now, cement blocks cracked by rain and winter ice, bright flowers and green grasses springing upward through the cracks.

Everywhere was bleak desolation. They passed holes in the ground that had once been basements. Walls still stood in other places, and further on, a great stone fence wound gracefully about what had been a private park.

Rubble came to the ground, the crushed remains of towering buildings blasted to bits by the Gharrians' concussors. Here and there, shards of indestructible plastic poked toward the sky to mark where vehicles had collapsed and dusted away in the course of centuries.

They came at last to a mighty stack of ruptured stone and plastics. Lura picked her way over the rubble, then dropped into a small hole, beckoning for Trent to follow. He came cautiously up the pile of stone, hand close to his gun, feeling his nerves crawl, now that he was close to his destination. This was not the situation he had planned five hundred—he grinned wryly—years ago.

Then he sat, dangled his feet into the hole, dropped through.

Lura steadied him, and he stood upright, his head almost even with the ceiling of stone blocks. Light came through the in-

terstices, and he could see that the girl was urging him toward a blank wall of grey plastic fifty feet away.

He walked slowly, conscious of being watched, eyes tightening when he saw the girl give a tapping signal to the wall. Then a door pivoted open, and three men were covering him with needle-sharp spears.

"Kill him," Lura cried. "*He's a Gharrian spy!*"

III

KIMBALL TRENT was already moving, swinging to one side, the flame gun fitting snugly into the palm of his hand. There was no laughter in his eyes now, nor no friendliness in his heart. He felt a sympathy for the girl; but the die had been cast, and he must play out the role.

"Don't make me kill you," he said briefly.

The leader of the trio laughed aloud, the sound rocking from wall to wall of the weird hole in the fallen masonry. He came lightly forward, blond hair gleaming, great muscles rippling over his superb body. He carried himself with the grace of a dancer, the spear held crosswise in his hands, ready for instant action at any angle.

"Ho!" he said. "The traitor is mine."

Flame roared from Kimball Trent's gun, and the iron shaft of the blond giant's spear melted and dripped in splattering white-hot globules where the energy touched.

Low cries of fear whirled from the other two men, and the blond stared stupidly at his useless spear, dropped it as the heat crept along the haft. He stared at Trent, and no fear was in his eyes; only a growing respect and hate.

"Traitor!" he snarled, came driving in.

Trent went spinning to one side, slipping in the way that all army men were trained, then chopped with a cool calculating skill at the base of the giant's neck with the pistol butt. The giant dropped inertly, and Kimball Trent faced Lura and the spearmen again.

"One!" he said grimly. "The next to attack me dies. Now take me to the Elder."

There was a shadow in the doorway that

materialized into the figure of a man. "I am the Elder, Barb," he said. "Who are you?"

He was tall, the loose robe hanging straight from lean shoulders, his thin features stern as he gazed at the scene. His hands were empty, yet they gave a sense of power to him, for the fingers were long and tapering, the palms broad. He watched Trent quietly through eyes that gave the uncanny impression of seeing much and retaining all.

He stepped from the doorway, stood waiting quietly, pale eyes appraising the man from the past, features tightening in puzzled memory, as though he was trying to recall someone he had seen before.

"He is a spy, Elder," Lura cried. "He appeared from nowhere, *overcame a Master*, and slew a brok. He carries weapons such as only the Masters have—and he has a double name."

"My name is Trent, Kimball Trent," Trent said evenly. "I was searching for anyone alive—"

The blond giant stirred at his feet, moaned, then came groggily to his feet. He blinked dazed eyes, saw Trent, instantly fell to a half-crouch, hands knotting into blocky fists.

"Enough, Korm," the Elder snapped, and the giant relaxed.

The tension was easing now, dispersed by the calmness of the Elder. Quietly, Trent holstered his flame gun, then crossed his arms, stood quietly waiting for the old man to speak.

"I have seen you somewhere before," the Elder said, "and your double name is familiar in the depths of my mind." His voice changed subtly, grew desperately grim. "What do you here?" he finished.

"Let us talk somewhere else," Trent said. "I shall be glad to tell my story then."

The Elder nodded, turned and stepped through the door. Kimball Trent followed, the remaining four coming directly after. The blond giant touched a stud on the wall, and the door came softly closed, mantling all with sable darkness.

Light swelled in a pale nimbus from a wall lamp, and they began walking down a narrow tunnel. Sweat dripped from the walls, and the air was coldly damp. Their

feet made rasping noises, and the sound of their breathing was abnormally loud. They did not speak, but Kimball Trent was aware of their coldly appraising looks, and the skin of his back crawled when he remembered the razor-sharp spears couched in capable hands.

The lights flickered out of being behind, new ones coming on, as they walked, leaving them in a perpetual cocoon of brilliance, making the darkness a velvet wall eternally pressing in. Close at hand light speared suddenly from a side tunnel, and the Elder led the way into it, halted at the side of a low mono-wheel car that rested on a single plastic track.

He waited until all had seated themselves in the car, then stepped into the front, touched a series of studs. Vibration came from a concealed motor, and the mono-wheel car slipped into whining speed almost instantly.

THE WALLS whirled by, and the air was a solid blast against their faces. Kimball Trent turned slightly as the car sped along, watching the faces, nerves tightening at the suspicion and distrust that held all in thrall.

He gave his attention to the machine in which they rode, saw that it was a model but slightly better than the ones to which he had been accustomed. The plastic air-shield had been removed for some reason, otherwise the passengers could have carried on a conversation in normal tones.

The tunnel wound through the ground like the home of a worm, slipping through mazes of interlocking tracks, automatic relays making certain that the car was not shunted into the path of an approaching vehicle. But they met no other cars; there was a sense of death and desolation in the tunnels and depots.

The car began to slow, the walls firming at either side, and came at last to a stop at a single platform on which stood three men armed with knives and spears. They were dressed as were his captors, in loose robes, which they apparently wore against the chill of their underground retreat.

They saluted as the car came to a stop, stepped forward, weapons levelled, when they saw Trent.

"A prisoner, Elder," the first said respectfully.

The Elder shook his head. "A friend," he said gently.

Kimball Trent stepped to the platform, stretched his hand to help Lura, flushed when she ignored his hand and came from the vehicle without aid. The others ranged themselves at his back; and the tension was in the group again.

"This way," the Elder said. "We shall talk in my room."

"Elder, his weapons!" Korm said briefly.

Kimball Trent shrugged, lifted his guns free, handed them to the giant who took them with gingerly respect.

"Do not experiment with them," Trent advised.

Korm grinned wryly, laid them on the platform. "I want *nothing* to do with them," he said grimly.

Then the Elder and Kimball Trent were going through the open door, the others remaining behind. They followed a short lighted tunnel carved through living rock, turned aside into a single room.

"I make you welcome," the Elder said.

Kimball Trent gazed curiously about, seeing the crudeness of the furnishings; the room was furnished like that of an ascetic, not like the home of the leader of some group. It had a spartan simplicity in the plastic furniture, the bare walls white and unmarked.

Kimball Trent chose a chair at the side of a table, waited until the Elder had seated himself and pushed what appeared to be some sort of signal button.

A young man, brown-haired and athletic, came through the door, nodded in greeting, stared curiously at Trent. He walked slowly to the table, bent his head in tribute.

"Valur, this is Kimball Trent, a newcomer," the Elder said. "We shall listen to his story." He turned to Trent. "Valur is the Reader; it is he who knows the past and who is the keeper of the books."

"I make you welcome," Valur said quietly, eyes wise beyond his years calmly studying the well-knit body of Trent.

"Your story?" the Elder prompted gently.

Kimball Trent began to speak. He told of his awakening, of his rescue of Lura,

of his being brought to the tunnels. He saw the skepticism in the Elder's eyes, was conscious of the probing of his statements by Valur. He told nothing of the fortress that had stayed untenanted for five centuries, told only that he had been buried in a cave, and had come miraculously alive.

Finished, he relaxed against the chair back, waited for the questions. He could feel the perspiration on his forehead, for he sensed the mettle of the men, knew that he would not leave the underground alive if they believed him to be a spy of the Gharrians.

"What think you?" the Elder asked Valur.

Valur seated himself directly before Trent. "You claim to be a Kimball Trent?" he asked.

"Yes," Trent said.

"There was once a Kimball Trent who fought the Masters when first they came. He was the friend of a man called Doctor Boyliss, and one of the first leaders of the fight against the Masters."

"I'm the one," Kimball Trent said grimly.

"You will submit to a neuro test?"

"Gladly."

VALUR strode to a side door, entered, returned with a small neurograph machine. He clamped cables to the arms, legs and head of Trent, adjusted dials, then began his questioning. For minutes he talked, both he and the Elder studying the dials. Slowly, amazement came to their faces, excitement flickering in their eyes. At last, they freed the cables, and Trent relaxed.

"Satisfied?" he asked.

"One more test," Valur said, left the room.

Kimball Trent smiled at the Elder. "My story must sound utterly insane," he said.

"It does," the Elder said noncommittally.

Then Valur was back, gently carrying a plasti-book, opening it as he came. He spread the book on the table, opening it to a group picture, indicating one man. He took a small box from a pocket in his robe, made prints of Trent's fingerprints.

"It is he," he said at last, pushing the book and prints aside.

There was silence then, the Elder and

Valur studying the man before them with awe-filled eyes. Trent shifted uncomfortably.

"Now, suppose you tell me your story?" he asked.

The Elder nodded. "There are about three thousand of us Barbs beneath the city. Our ancestors fought the Masters, hiding like beasts beneath the ground, never finding the weapons that would rid the Earth of the Gharrians. We do nothing now but live and hope, sometimes making raids on the breeding stations, trying to free those who would escape." Weariness came to his voice. "The breeders lack spirit now, after centuries of slavery; usually they will not run, even when their devil-wires are broken."

"Devil wires?" Trent asked.

Valur explained. "They slay at a touch, and when broken, they snap and spit yellow flames."

"Electricity?"

Valur shrugged. "I have read the word, but it means nothing to me."

Kimball Trent gestured at the lights. "Those lights and the mono-wheel car; they are both somewhat electrical in nature."

The Elder shook his head. "We know how none of the things work that we use. We find them, and sometimes they do certain things; when they cease to function, we forget them. None of us have the knowledge to maintain or repair them."

Kimball Trent nodded. He saw now many things that he had not understood before. He had seen primitive spears and a car that ran by *atomilect* power, had seen one man who could read and others to whom reading was a mystery not to be fathomed by ordinary men. He had seen the intelligence that gleamed in his captors' eyes, and yet they had thought him a superman because he had slain one of the Gharrians' hunting broks with a flame gun.

"I can repair them," he said at last. "But first, I must know how you live, and the machines upon which you live."

The Elder came lithely to his feet. "We shall show you all," he said, faint hope flickering in his voice. "You will find conditions much changed from those you knew." He smiled. "Later, you shall tell us of your world."

He led the way into the tunnel, sent

a guard for Trent's weapons. Kimball Trent fitted them onto his shoulder and hip again, then strode down the tunnel at the side of his two guides.

"You spoke of breeding stations," he said as they walked. "What did you mean?"

Muscles knotted in Valur's jaws. "They are breeding stations," he said. "For almost five centuries the Gharrians have forced Earth to supply slaves for them. Great depots are made into slave camps, and the children born are carried in the crimson ships into space. We never see them again."

THERE was hate in Kimball Trent again, the surging twisting of emotions that had driven him in the days he had fought the monsters from infinity. It had lain dormant the last few days, stifled by his thoughts of the centuries he had slept, smothered by his fear that the world was dead and he alive. Now, knowing the way in which men lived on their planet, the hate came alive again, and he could feel the muscles of his body swelling against his harness.

"And nothing can be done?" he asked.

"Nothing!" Valur shook his head.

"The Masters cannot be slain, and they hunt us like animals with their broks. We try now only to stay alive, praying for a miracle." His eyes swung to Trent. "It may be that you are that miracle."

Kimball Trent flushed, feeling helpless and naked and impotent. "We fought," he said, "and our weapons were of no avail. The men who might have devised new weapons are all dead, and I do not have the knowledge for manufacturing along new lines of thought."

The Elder's voice was gentle. "We shall win," he said. "We shall win eventually, for men were never meant to crawl as animals." His voice changed. "We shall call you 'Trent'," he finished, "and say that you are a Barb from Connet, for my people will not believe the tale you tell. Or if they did believe, they might think you a superman, and that would not be good."

The light of an entrance ahead came into view as they rounded a corner in the tunnel. They could hear voices; and the odors of cooking came on the faint breeze.



Lura

Trent shivered suddenly. This was not the way that he thought the world would be. Never in even his widest dreams had he thought Earth could be conquered. Now it was so, and the future was a hopeless thing, Earthmen fighting with feather-weapons against the invulnerable armor of the Gharrians.

They stepped from the tunnel, and Lura joined them from where she stood with Korm and another man. Her gaze was level and inscrutable as she studied Trent's face.

"Did he lie?" she asked.

"He spoke the truth," the Elder said evenly.

Lura smiled then, and the warmth of her smile was like the soothing fingers of a Summer breeze stroking Trent's features.

"I am glad," she said simply. "One who faces a Master and his brok should be one of us." She beckoned to Korm. "You fought once; now meet as friends."

Korm grinned, held out his hand. "My sister told me of how you saved her; I am your friend." He tensed the muscles of his proud neck, winced instinctively. "Some time you must show me that fighting trick; never before have I been bested in battle."

"Any time," Kimball Trent said.

"Come," Valur said. "Light talk shall wait until later."

Kimball Trent turned to follow his guides, conscious of the slim girl at his side, wondering how any woman could be so fearlessly reliant and so feminine at the same time. He glanced at the blond giant, saw the knowing look that came to the grey eyes when they went from him to Lura, and hotness flooded upward from his throat.

He turned his attention to the Elder. "What first?" he asked.

"My people," the Elder said simply.

Together, they began their tour.

IV

THREE WEEKS had passed since Kimball Trent's arrival. At first, he had met doubt and suspicion from the inhabitants of the tunnels beneath the rubble of New York. His manner of speech was odd, as were his weapons, his clothing and his knowledge. But gradually, he had been accepted by the majority of those he had met through the Elder.

The dwellers of the underground caverns were a strange admixture of modern and primitive cultures. None but the Elder, the Reader and his acolytes could read or write. They knew nothing of the past except what the Reader gave to them from his books, or what the Singers gave to them in their songs of legend.

They had been cleaved into three classes: workers, warriors and growers, each with its distinct duties, each contributing to the welfare of the whole. The warriors were the hunters of wild game and the protectors of their homes; the workers kept everything used in as good repair as they were capable of doing, except upon the mechanical machines and contrivances of which they had no knowledge either inherited or acquired. The growers were the food gardeners and flock tenders, utilizing their skill in abandoned subway tubes where gardens grew fabulously beneath the radi-lights studding the walls, and where various food and milk animals and food fowls were kept in penned-in tunnels.

Over all were the Elder and his council

of five. They ruled by election of the people, and so kindly and wise had been their rule that never had one been deposed except by death. They studied the old books, sent parties searching on great journeys in efforts to contact other groups of men and women hidden from the invaders. They made the laws that were needed, interpreted them, and meted out what punishment was necessary. Major crimes were unknown, for the knowledge had been bred into generation after generation that life could only be maintained by absolute dependence upon each other.

This was the society that Kimball Trent found beneath the earth, one that amazed and embittered him; for in his mind was the world that had been his, one of freedom of movement and thinking, with only the coming of the Gharrians to mar the peace that had seemed eternal.

He found a great admiration, too, for the people of the caverns. Never had he heard grumbling among them, always there had been soft laughter. And always had there been, deep beneath their mannerisms, that steel-like will that would never bow beneath the weird tyrants.

For the first week, he had done little more than meet the men and women and children, acquainting himself with their way of living, measuring them against his memories of those who had fought at his side five hundred years before. He had felt the bite of conscience, remembering the fortress that lay hidden but a few hours away from these tunnel homes; but he kept the knowledge to himself, not certain that these people were what they claimed to be in actuality.

In the second week, he began his repairing of the machines that lay abandoned where they had fallen into disuse. He grinned at the sounds of amazement made by Lura and Korm, his constant companions, as he replaced wiring and reset the atomic burners so that machines would work and run again. To him the repairing was as simple as the setting of a watch, for the machines had been almost indestructible and foolproof when they were built. They had needed but to have certain small parts replaced, and the atomic vibrators replenished with fuel; but to Lura and Korm the sudden working of machines discarded long before

they were born was little short of miraculous.

Kimball Trent had explained as he repaired, showing the simplicity of every machine, indicating how many others could be repaired and maintained. Korm had grasped the knowledge with a natural skill, had elected himself to instruct others in the 'mechanic' art. Lura had been more slow, mechanics not her natural bent, but she retained what she learned, and demonstrated it on several occasions.

There had been other long hours, too, spent in talks with the Elder and the Council of Five. In them, he had told of the past, had explained the manner in which people lived, had told of the religions and the work and the miracles of machinery that made living comfortable and easy of accomplishment. He had used his smattering of several foreign languages to open dusty books to the inquiring mind of the Readers, had given knowledge that would raise the standard of living of the cavern dwellers.

In return, he had learned that colonies were scattered over the world, underground cities where tens of thousands of free men lived and died, waiting for the day when the Earth would be delivered of the monsters that held it in an iron grip of tyrannical mastery.

He had made his decision to disclose the location of the underground fortress, with its weapons and facilities for living in comfort. He knew now that these were his people, even though they had come five centuries after him. Within them burned the flame that motivated him, and he sensed that within them might lie the salvation of the world.

HE WAS finishing the repairing of a water pump, when first he heard the excited voice of Korm calling from nearby. Straightening, wrench in hand, he waved an answer, waited until the blond giant had come to his side.

"Your guns, Trent," Korm said breathlessly. "We make a raid today."

"A raid? Where?"

"At the south of York. Spies have brought information that new prisoners have been brought to the encampment; they will be more than willing to escape. And perhaps others may come, too."

The thrill of the words swept through Kimball Trent's mind, surged hot blood into his temples. He dropped the wrench, caught up his guns from where they lay beside the pump.

"How many are going?" he asked.

"A few," Korm answered, setting the pace toward a small group waiting beside a tunnel mouth.

"Hurry," a voice called clearly.

"Lura!" Kimball Trent said. "Surely you're not letting her go along."

Korm frowned. "Of course," he said. "She is good with knife and spear; she has been on many raids."

"But she is a woman!"

Korm shrugged. "That is good; she will influence the female breeders to escape."

Then they were at the edge of the group, and Korm was introducing the five men and two women. Valur and Lura, Trent had already met. He shook hands with Frong, a jovial red-haired giant almost as huge as Korm. Neela, the second woman smiled shyly in greeting, clung hand to hand with her dark-skinned husband, Matt. Nels and Parb, the last two men, nodded silent greetings, their strong hands caressing the spears they carried.

They had discarded the tunnel-robcs, were dressed now in chest harnesses hung with knives, and in brief leather skirts that came halfway down their thighs. Sandals protected their feet and ankles.

"Come," Korm said, led the way into the side tunnel.

They walked the length of the tunnel, entered a large mono-wheel car, Korm sending it speeding down the single track. The walls blurred from the speed, and conversation was impossible for the fifteen minutes of the ride.

This was the first time that Kimball Trent had travelled in this direction from the tunnel city. He prodded his memory, trying to recall details of the city, recognizing Grand Central Air Terminal, and farther on the tubes that had been used by ground traffic and the underground trains to reach New Jersey. But after that, he recognized no stations or details; evidently the tunnels had been built after he had been frozen in the fortress.

Korm touched studs on the control

panel, brought the car to a sliding stop. "We go no farther by car," he said quietly. "Follow me, and be careful to make no sound; broks might be around."

He stepped to the small platform at the right of the car, gently eased open a small door, went through the black opening. Lura followed on his heels, and after her came Trent and the rest of the party.

They followed a dank sloping repair tunnel, slipping on the mossy damp flooring, going toward the faint glimmer of light a hundred feet ahead. Korm hissed for silence at the end, carefully parted the fringe of camouflaging bushes, searched the landscape for signs of hidden watchers. Satisfied, he slipped into the open, gave a helping hand to Lura. Within seconds, all stood within the cover of a thick growth of trees and bushes.

"This way," Korm whispered.

They squirmed through the brush, taking care to make no sound, keen eyes searching everywhere about. Kimball Trent felt the tension mounting unconsciously in his heart, felt the cold sheen of sweat on his body. He gripped the rifle with nervous hands, felt a bit of relief when Lura flashed him a brief warm smile. Somehow, they were very close at the moment.

"There!" Korm said at last, squatted behind a bush.

KIMBALL TRENT saw the building first, towering like the round silo of a Midwestern farmer, slotted windows strips of black against the gleaming red surface of seamless plastic. His gaze drifted to the ground, and muscles bulged along his back.

There were people there, herded together in a great wire pen. There were men and women and children; and even from a distance, Trent could see the hate and fear and despair that tortured every face.

He scowled unbelievably when he saw the guards. They were metal men, robots, stalking steady guard duty a few feet outside of the wire enclosure. They were weird caricatures of men, quartz eyes staring straight ahead, concussion boxes dangling from waist cords, tiny puffs of dust spurting with each step of

their flat mechanical feet.

Kimball Trent shook his head. He had heard nothing of the robots, had never seen them when first he fought the Gharrians. Evidently they had been created after the world had been conquered. Now they walked in deadly silence, a menace against which an unarmed man would have no chance at all.

A man died, even as Trent watched. He cried his hate and raced toward the fence, leaping high so as to clamber over it with catlike speed and agility. Trent felt the unheard warning coming from his chest, stifled it, even as electricity crackled and writhed along the figure of the man and dropped him in a smouldering blackened heap onto the ground.

No sound came from the prisoners; they stared in dull hate, as the nearest robot ignored the crackling electricity and pulled the body below the lowest strand of wire. Dragging the corpse by the legs, the robot soullessly pulled it toward a shallow ditch, dumped it in, then again began its endless patrol.

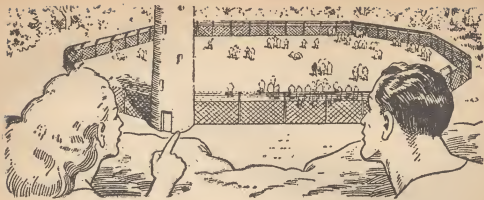
"The inhuman beasts!" Lura cried softly, tears in her eyes.

A Gharrian came from the base of the tower, walking with its ponderous smoothness, the single eye glittering in the sunlight. There was something obscene and deadly about its deliberate stalking of the prisoners huddled within the enclosure.

Its long multi-fingered arms were like writhing tentacles, as it singled out a man and woman, capturing them before they could move. Three men hurled themselves at its broad back, beating insanely with their fists. A robot came rushing in, battered them free, then beat them into unconsciousness with mailed feet. The Gharrian turned, stalked toward the tower, dragging the man and woman with an unconscious incredible ease. It was like a blue monster from hell dragging two victims to some hideous sacrifice.

"Where?" Kimball Trent breathed.

Korm shrugged. "We're not certain," he said. "One escaped prisoner said that, in the tower, tests are made of their mentality and fertility." His great hands knotted about the heavy spear shaft. "Some day I shall enter that tower, and all hell shall not stop my destroying every Master therein!"



Then the passion was gone from his voice, and he was their leader again. "Matt, Nels, Parb," he ordered. "Go around to the other side and create a diversion. We shall tear down the fence from this side."

The three men nodded and were gone like drifting shadows. Korm opened the small bundle Frong, the red-haired giant, handed him, disclosing several plastic ropes, gang-hooks attached to one end of each. He distributed the ropes to Valur, Frong and himself. Trent watched intently, as they fitted the spears to the hooked end of the ropes.

"Is this your plan?" he asked quietly.

Korm nodded shortly, testing a knot with heavy fingers.

Kimball Trent lifted his rifle. "I can blow the fence to pieces with a couple of shots?" he said.

"No!" Lura laid a slim hand on the rifle barrel. "We want no more noise than necessary. They discovered us early the last time we raided, and loosed the broks. We lost more than half of our group."

Trent shrugged. "All right, then, what do I do?"

"Sit and watch," Korm said shortly. "Cover us with your weapons."

THEN he and Frong were in the open, walking steadily down the gentle slope, ropes coiled in their left hands, the spears couched in their right. And even as they began their march, a yellow rope sailed out of the trees across the enclosure, settled about the neck of a robot, tightened with a whiplike snap. The robot spun halfway about, then toppled with a metallic clatter.

"Ready?" Lura whispered.

Neela nodded, dark eyes worried and intent as she watched her husband and two companions pulling with all their strength upon the far rope.

Four robots had whirled at the clattering, were speeding to the aid of their companion. Cable fingers caught at the black concussors at their waists, were lifting them for lethal shots.

"Now!" Korm's voice came winging back.

He and Frong threw with gigantic strength, the spears speeding aloft, hovering, dropping just past the coppery strands of electrified wire. Sparks danced a drunken saraband along the fence, grounded through the spears. Then the connecting ropes were pulling taut, the hooks catching firmly. The two giants braced heavy legs, muscles rippling and swelling along massive shoulders. The ropes tightened, grew solid, and the fence began to lean toward them. Posts snapped with brittle reports—and then the fence was ruptured, broken wires leaping and sparking with white hot violence.

"Ho, Barbs!" Korm bellowed. "Run for freedom. Dodge the wires and follow me."

Then the action was almost too swift to follow. The four robots turned as one, lifting their concussors to focus on the blond giant. Kimball Trent fired in one swift move, levering the rifle for explosive needles, the racking bellow of the concussions bounding through the churning air. One robot blew to pieces, and the explosion knocked down the second. The third fired, but the shot went wild, for a second rope whirled from nowhere, jerked him off balance. The shot ex-

ploded fifty feet over Trent's head, blasted him face down in the dirt.

He scrambled to his knees, fired at the fourth robot, blew it to pieces, then whirled to watch the enclosure again. He saw the two Gharrians standing in the doorway of the tower, blasted two shots their way, saw them rock from the explosions.

Men and women were running for the breach in the fence. Some died, touched by the vicious sparks that flicked from the whipping wires; others scrambled through to safety. They made no sound, but came in an instinctive rush, coming directly toward the great blond and red giants who had torn down the fence with insulated ropes of soft plastic.

"Good!" Neela said quietly, straightened to her full height.

"Broks!" Lura cried desperately, and terror was in the single word, a terror more horrible than the word could express.

THEY CAME, gliding from a side door, one after the other, until fully a dozen stood before the tower. Then they turned and came in a murderous wave of death up the slope, going straight toward the rescuers, ignoring the escaping prisoners. Saliva dropped from gaping fangs, and their six legs threw them forward with an incredible speed. They mewed like gigantic cats, then hissed their hate.

Korm and Frong turned and ran before the group of prisoners, knives glittering in their hands as they watched the beasts come in a circling attack. There was no fear in their features, only a calm determination that didn't alter.

Kimball Trent came to his feet, braced heavy thigh muscles against the concussion shocks that were coming, then set the rifle for continuous fire. He swayed the muzzle like a fire hose, spraying death into the broks, blowing them to bloody scraps of bone and flesh, cursing, as some of them escaped the blasting fire.

The rifle clicked empty, and he caught at the flame gun. Korm and Frong were at his side then, knives bared, and he waved them on.

"Run, you fools," he snarled. "Get the prisoners to safety. I can kill them all

with the flame gun."

He fired as he spoke, and the orange flames gushed in a hellish holocaust that roasted two of the fanged monsters to death in midleap. Three others whipped to one side, split forces, came whirling in from different directions.

The last of the prisoners were by him now, except for a few who had dropped from concussion shock. He tried to scream a warning at Lura, who had darted out and was helping a woman to her feet; but he had no time, for the three snake-scaled broks came snarling in.

Full power he had the gun, and full power he needed. The first brok charged directly into the flame, vanished in a greasy puff of smoke. The second was barely caught by the swinging flame, screamed in agony, bounded to safety. The third drove squarely in, evading the flame for a second, then died, the vortex of surging energy slashing away the forepart of its body with magical speed.

Kimball Trent whirled, sent a spear of flame after the fleeing brok, caught it a hundred yards away, dropped it in its tracks. Then, breathing deeply, sickened by the odor of burning flesh, he raced to aid Lura. She had half-lifted the woman to her feet, and he bent to lift her to his shoulders. It was then he saw the terror in Lura's violet eyes. He tried to whirl, managed only to get part of the way about.

He saw the single eye of the Gharrian, cursed himself for lulling himself into thinking that the alien monsters moved but slowly. He reached for his gun, knowing the weapon was useless, hoping only to give Lura a chance at escape.

Then the first arm of the Gharrian lashed out, coiled about him like an octopus tentacle, drew him close, and a second sledged with a brutal scientific precision. He felt the hurt spreading in a racing wave over his body, tried to fight away the blanket of darkness. He heard Lura's scream, saw dimly that the Gharrian had caught her with his other arms.

Then the blackness became opaque and he could see nothing. He felt a second blow, and he was sinking into a funnel of darkness that had no bottom. He heard a faint echo of Lura's scream; then he knew no more.

HE WAS on a boat, water slapping his face each time the boat rocked in the troughs of the spilling waves. He tried to sit, but nausea cramped his belly, and he felt the blackness knotting his mind again. He heard his name called again and again, but he did not have the strength to answer.

Then the curtain began lifting from his memory, and thoughts came flooding to his mind. He blinked dazedly, focusing his eyes grimly, saw that Lura was bent over him, a wet cloth in her hand.

"Some fight!" he tried to joke, and the pain of his head took all of the jolliness from his tone.

"You'll be all right," Laura said.

He leaned back against the pressure of her arm, saw that he had been lying on a crude bunk against the wall of an unfurnished room. He swung his legs to the floor, braced his head with both hands, gently explored the swelling bruise-knots that marked his skull.

"Never again," he said grimly. "Next time, I run."

Lura smiled gamely, worry shadows fleeing back into the depths of her violet eyes. She brushed back a stray lock of red-gold hair from her cheek, allowed her gaze to wander about the room.

"The Master brought us here and left a metal man on guard. You have been unconscious for hours."

Kimball Trent came groggily to his feet, bracing himself with one hand on the wall. Then he circled the room, stopping at the slit window, trying to see into the velvet night, going on to peer through the barred grille in the door at the expressionless inhuman face of the robot that stood at motionless guard across the hallway. Farther down the hall, on either side, he could see more doors with grilled openings.

"Are we in the tower?" he asked.

"Yes," Lura answered from where she sat. "The Master brought us directly here."

"Did the others escape?"

"I do not know. I did not see them when we were brought in, and none have been brought here since." Her self control gave slightly. "Kim, what are we going to do?"

Kimball Trent grinned, forcing back

the futility that beat at his thoughts. "We're going to get out of here, one way or the other," he said reassuringly.

"How?"

Trent shrugged, wished the ache in his head would stop bouncing about. "I don't know," he said equably. "But I've got a hunch we're in for a little quiz session with the Gharrians."

"Quiz session?"

"Sure. Questions and answers; they question and we answer."

Lura's face was white beneath her tan, but she smiled at Trent. "I hope they hurry with whatever they've got planned; I'm beginning to feel hungry."

They laughed then, laughed with the brightness and hope of youth, amused by the incongruity of worrying about a meal when their lives were probably forfeit for the events that had taken place. They laughed, and the robot moved to the grille, stared with blank telephotic eyes.

"Curious little devil, isn't he?" Trent said, walked toward the bunk.

He watched the grille for a moment, thoughts whirling in his mind, trying to form some plan of escape that could be based on the reactions of the robot to anything out of the ordinary that happened among the prisoners he was set to guard.

THE MINUTES walked by on leaden feet, neither of them speaking, each intent on silent thoughts. There were no sounds, inside or out, and a chill came to the room from the night air.

Then there came the heavy sound of metallic footsteps from the corridor, echoed by the shuffling of bare feet. Hands fumbled at the door, and it swung open, an Earthman entering, the doorway blocked by a single robot.

"I've some questions to ask," the intruder said fearfully.

"Traitor!" Lura spat, turned to Trent. "He gave himself up to the Masters weeks ago, fleeing from a Connet colony he betrayed."

The man drew himself up, glancing at the robot at his back, then turning to face the prisoners. Fear was in his eyes, but brutality masked his face.

"I can order you killed," he said. "Don't drive me far." He glanced at the rifle and flame gun he carried. "Where did you

get these weapons?" he asked Trent.

"Are they weapons?" Kimball Trent asked mockingly.

"I don—the Master says they are."

"Then they can talk?" Incredulity was in Trent's voice. "I thought they had no speech."

"They do not speak, not the way we do; but they make themselves understood." Perspiration slid in greasy drops down the man's face. "Where did you get these weapons?" he asked again.

The robot came into the room, staring glassily, tentacular arms swaying gently at its sides. Lura stiffened, pressed closer to Trent. He grinned, nodded at the metal man.

"Your dog?" he asked.

"Dog?" the man said puzzledly, turned his head.

And Kimball Trent flowed into action, leaping with the grace and darting agility of a panther.

His left hand reached out, caught the arm of the man, and his right hand chopped down in a vicious rabbit punch at the base of the other's neck. Bones snapped from the brutal power, and the man went utterly limp.

The robot came driving forward with an incredible speed, tentacles of whipping steel lashing for Trent's throat. But even as the robot came swinging in, Trent whirled, spinning the rifle as a club, smashed the automaton squarely across the eyes.

Glass popped and shattered, tiny shards flying through the air. Light flared intensely white in each eye socket, then died to red and vanished into blackness.

Then the robot was but an eyeless machine methodically smashing its way about the room. It was a legged juggernaut, a ton of destruction that crushed the bunk to splinters with a double sweep of its heavy tentacles.

Trent bent low, avoiding death by a fraction of an inch, saw that Lura had flowed into action almost as quickly as he. She stood at the door now, flame gun in hand, waiting for him. He dodged to her side, caught the door, slammed it shut, then locked it with a turn of the switch.

He dropped the shattered rifle, caught the flame gun in his right hand. "This

is it," he said briefly, led the way at a run down the corridor.

They ducked about the corner of the hall, heard the battering sounds disappearing behind. Their breaths were hot in their throats, and the utter soullessness of the tower was a dank mantle that shrouded them.

"Which way?" Lura said at the double door facing them at the end of the corridor.

"This," Trent said shortly, pushed through a swing door.

The second hall was lighted by radi-lights in ceiling brackets, and a current of air came strong against their faces from the far end. Light shone through the bottom crack of a doorway, and they went toward it on cat-feet, making no sound, stiffling, their very breathing for fear of discovery.

Strangely, there was no sound of alarm above, nor did they hear sounds of pursuit. They glanced instinctively at each other, then drifted forward, the single weapon their only defense against attack.

KIMBALL TRENT almost smiled when he remembered the wish that had been Korm's that day. He would have given ten years of his life to exchange places with Lura and Trent, to have had this opportunity of wreaking his vengeance upon the Masters in their fortress.

Then the thought was gone, and they stood before the door of the room from which light came. Trent laid his finger across his lips, nodded for Lura to wait. She shook her head impatiently, started to speak.

It was the natural thing to do to keep her quiet. He bent his head to hers, and her lips were soft and sweet and fragrant against his mouth. He came close to her, savoring her warmth and pliancy, feeling the urge that lay in them both. Then he backed away, smiled from deep in his heart.

"Wait for me," he whispered, and was gone through the doorway.

His gun was out in front of him, finger trembling on the stud. He saw the Gharrian standing to one side, and hell raved from his flame pistol as he fired instinc-

tively. The cone of ravening energy twisted its deadly way over the entire body—yet the alien monster made no move to flee or to attack.

Heat grew and built and swelled, drove him back a full step—and still the blue-grey monster made no move. Red rage pulsed in Trent's mind, and he whispered, "Damn! Damn! Damn!" over again as the last charge in the flame began to die away.

And at last, the gun empty and cooling in his hand, he stood facing the Gharrian, blinking against the heat, smelling the odor of charred plastic where the flame had touched the wall. Then he gasped, bent forward in excitement.

For the Gharrian had no head.

Kimball Trent took two cautious steps forward, standing on tiptoe, staring at the cavity where the eye-head had been. And what he saw chilled the blood in his body.

For the Gharrian was a robot, a tiny control board deep in the aperture, a curved hood dropping on hinges to the back.

Kimball Trent whirled then and began to stalk the room. He didn't know exactly what he sought, but there was a singing in his mind, and the knowledge he had just gained was the answer to many things that had never been solved.

He saw the flickering movement at the corner of the room, took two long strides that way, snatched with bare hands at the monstrosity that squirmed with miniature strength against the grip of his lean fingers.

He almost vomited at sight of the weird creature that fought to free itself. It was like a pink convoluted brain, with spider legs like wormy tentacles coiling and uncoiling in mad rage. Two tiny eyes glared lidlessly at Trent, and a hole like a sucker mouth gaped, showing blue toothless gums.

Trent increased the pressure of his fingers, and the tiny eyes popped in agony, the tentacles wrapping about his fingers, trying to pry them free. And in the midst of the struggle, a thought pried its way into Trent's consciousness.

"Do not slay me, Earthman. Let me live."

KIMBALL TRENT went to the side table where small machines and tools were scattered haphazardly. He emptied out a deep plastic jar, set it upright, then dropped the pink monstrosity into its depths. His skin crawled, and he heard Lura's gasp, as the Gharrian righted itself, trying frantically to climb the glasslike walls of the prison.

"Laura, bolt the door," Trent said without turning his head, then spoke directly at the squirming blob of flesh. "Do you understand what I am saying?" he asked.

"Faintly," the answer came welling into his mind. "Our minds are not enough alike to catch all thoughts."

"So you are one of the Masters!" Trent sighed contemptuously, glancing at the monster robot that all Earth had thought to be a creature that lived.

"I am one," the Gharrian thought.

Lura came to Trent's side. "Put a cover on the jar," she said, shuddering, "and we shall take him along with us."

Mental laughter shook their minds, a dry ironical humor all the more terrible because there was no sound. They stared in horror at the brain-beast, while its thoughts raced through their consciousness.

"You cannot escape; all doors are guarded."

"Maybe!" Trent said aloud, lifting a sharp tool from the table, balancing it idly in one hand. Then he reached over, probed delicately at the scrambling pink beast in the jar, watched critically as green ichor oozed from a tiny cut the tool had inflicted.

"See us safely out, or you die," he said unemotionally.

The thought came hurtling back, utterly savage and unafraid. "Destroy me, and you surely die." There was an interval in which no message came. Then: "I shall bargain with you. Tell me where those ancient weapons were found, make yourself my prisoner, and the girl, as you call her, shall go free."

Trent carefully dropped the razor-sharp tool, heard the soundless shriek of agony that welled high as a tentacular leg was sheared completely away.

"I make no bargains," he said coldly.

He turned about, studying the single window that studded the far wall of the

room, catching up several tools from the bench, he crossed the plastic floor, studied the incredibly hard plastic that served as a pane through which the outer world could be seen.

He searched for a catch, realized there would be none, for this was a ground floor, and the Gharrians would leave no openings through which an attack could be made. Calmly, he beat at the pane with his pistol butt, bruising his hand, making absolutely no impression.

"Will it break?" Lura called softly.

"No. But it may cut." Trent chose the sharpest of the tools, bore down with all his weight.

The squeal of metal on plastic keened high, setting his teeth on edge; and then the sound had passed too high for him to hear. He finished the stroke, bent close, then straightened in defeat. There was not the slightest of scratches on the plastic window.

"Kim!" Lura cried, and he raced to her side.

Even as he reached her, the Gharrian began to putrefy. It had died during the few moments Trent had tried to break the window; and its monstrosity of a body was already beginning to rot in upon itself like a blighted spider caught in a flame.

"Damn!" Trent swore softly. "I probably squeezed too hard. Come."

He led the way toward the door through which they had come, lifted the single bar. He smiled tiredly, gamely, was warmed by the unquenchable courage that flamed in her bearing.

"Ready?" he asked, threw open the door at her wordless nod.

Facing them from ten feet away, single eyes emotionlessly watching, were three of the robot-Gharrians.

VI

"**R**UN!" Trent snapped, threw himself to one side, pausing for a fraction of a second to permit Lura to dart past him. Then, even before the Gharrians could move, they were darting through the side door, flung instantly open by Trent's driving hand.

He slammed the door, slammed the single bar shut, then whirled to follow the

girl. A soundless gasp of incredible awe came from his throat, and he froze motionless.

Kimball Trent went dashing forward, smashed the single darting pink monstrosity, as it raced toward a robot, with his heel, then stopped, and watched the incredible thing that filled the entire center of the room.

It was like a monster fishbowl, great cables snaking to atomic motors that hummed with quiet power. Colors glowed and played and flickered in the greenish liquid that filled the bowl, and the liquid bubbled softly within itself.

But the things that brought the sickness to Trent's and Lura's hearts and minds were the things that bobbed in the liquid. They were brains, some large, some shrunken in upon themselves, each attached to fine wires that led to grids at the center of the bowl. Larger wires ran from the grids to the sides of the bowl, slipped through and dropped to small platforms upon which rested the spider monsters who ruled the world.

"Life eaters!" Trent whispered. "They live on the lives and brains of the people they kill."

He walked about the great bowl, watching the lights flicker behind the plastic wall, seeing the sluggish movements of the creatures who sucked the life forces from the liquid bubbling so gently. Then with a calm viciousness that surprised even himself, he methodically crushed each of the pinkish monsters to death.

And with the death of the last monster, the first of the Gharrians in the hall attacked the door. Great sledging blows smashed at the plastic, each blow driving bulges where no man could have scratched the surface.

Kimball Trent stared thoughtfully at the bulging panel, his mind working clearly for the first time in minutes. There was no fear in him now, no blazing hate, only the crystal brightness of logic in his mind. He looked about the room, then beckoned for Lura to come to his side. She came trustingly, staring into his eyes, and he knew then his future was yet to come.

He grinned, kissed her gently. "You will do as I say. Go to the Reader and tell him to read about sound waves. Tell him that the Gharrians can be killed with

supersonic waves of sound; that that is the *only* way that they can be killed while in their armor. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Lura said quietly. "But I do not leave."

The door shattered inward, hanging on a single hinge, and through the opening came the invulnerable Gharrians, moving slowly toward the unarmed Earthman and girl.

Kimball Trent swung the girl behind him, retreated, wondering if the mad scheme he had would possibly work. And even as he thought, his hand reached out, ripped loose the cables from one of the motors that fed the current to the life-trap bowl.

He raced to the second, tore the cables free, winced, as the motor sang a shriller song, power mounting now that it no longer fed the bowl. He tore the third bunch of cables free, then shielded Lura with his body, as the motors began to race with incredible speed, their screams mounting higher and higher.

Still the Gharrians came forward, moving with an implacable deadliness that nothing could stop apparently, their concussors dangling from their waists. They would use their strength here, for concussion would wreck the life bowl, and they had no reason to fear the puny strengths of the couple they faced.

The screams of the motors were like knife blades now, biting into every nerve, wrenching agony from their brains. Trent and Lura gasped from the pain, pressed farther back around the great transparent bowl, striving desperately to evade that last moment when the Masters would reach them.

And then the shrill screams of the motor ceased, were gone, vibrations scaling past the audible, going into a supersonic range that their ears could not catch.

The first Gharrian lifted a mailed arm—and died.

HE DIED rather horribly, beating insensibly at his companion and the plastic wall. Then he was dead, and was but a toppling metal hulk that smashed to the floor.

Almost in the same instant, the others

died. They died as silently as they had lived, except for one simultaneous thought of agony that came clearly to the humans' minds.

Kimball Trent leaped past the bulk of the first slain Gharrian, closed the switches on the motors. Slowly they stopped, grew silent.

Without a word, Trent switched on the motors again, then raced at Lura's side from the room. Behind, the motors began their keening song again.

They found the outer door without trouble, guided by a supernal instinct that needed no voluntary thought. Trent threw the great bar and they raced outside, going toward the slope from which they had attacked the Gharrians hours before.

They heard Korm's great voice cry out, and relief gave strength to their flying legs. Then the blond giant was at their side, and behind him they saw the hundreds who had followed his leadership.

"Run!" Trent panted. "The tower will blow within seconds."

Then the motors exploded, lifting the tower in shattered fragments, blowing to dust the place that had been one of the Gharrians' strongholds. Flames leaped a mile into the air, fed by the ruptured atomic motors, spreading crimson light like the wave of a rock dropped into a still pond. The concussion passed, and all was still, the column of brilliance still leaping and pulsing into the night.

And watching the flame, his arm tight about the slender shoulders of Lura, was Kimball Trent, the man who had lived five hundred years to save his doomed world. He held her tightly, and the hope in his heart was a singing melody that crept into his mind, tangling his thoughts.

"Call the Elder," he said to grinning Korm. "I have a story to tell of a new home for all of us. And"—his voice grew strong, rang like that of a prophet—"of a weapon we can make that the Gharrians cannot fight."

Then he and Lura stood alone in a night that was a dream and they the dreamers. The first streamers of dawn were coming in the sky, foretelling of the new day that was coming to their world.

MISTS OF MARS

By **GEORGE A. WHITTINGTON**



Illustration by KIEMLE

BARRY WILLIAMS watched the last sunshine lance across the red sands of the Martian Desert. The sun dropped abruptly behind the flat horizon. With the black curtain of night, the usual sharp chill came to the thin Martian atmosphere.

The cold bit into Williams through the warm ore-seeker's outfit he'd adopted for this venture. He laughed suddenly, realizing why he noticed the cold. His body was tense, rigid. Unconsciously he was crouching, waiting, eyes narrowed, one heavily-gloved hand on his ray gun.

With the laugh, Barry relaxed, although his sharp blue eyes never ceased their wary sweep over the rolling sands. His hand dropped from the weapon. It would be useless anyway against the deadly white mist, for which he waited.

That it would come, Barry never doubted. It was known and dreaded by Earthmen in every Terrestrial Center on the red planet. In the past few weeks, Earthmen had disappeared, vanishing for the last time into the Martian night. Whispers said the white mist, the pale nemesis, sucked the life from them.

Only once had Earthmen seen the mist and lived to tell of it. A spaceship, beating toward one of the Centers on a night flight from a desert camp, had passed over a pale patch on the red sand. Its occupants, in their haste did not stop to investigate. Only later, telling of the strange sight, did they realize it had been mist—on a planet too arid for water vapor. Only then did they remember seeing an Earthman making his way on foot toward the same Center, within the patch.

Barry Williams' searching glance covered the terrain once more. Deimos, the smaller moon, was already high. The larger, swifter Phobos was rapidly overhauling its companion. Under their light,

"Kill all Martians," the orders read. "They are savages, and have no rights." But Special Investigator Barry Williams and Princess Deisanocta had other plans—plans that would bring destruction to the despoilers by releasing an age-old justice from the Crypts.

the scene was clear. But it was so every night on Mars, yet Earthmen who ventured into the desert at night died! Barry waited.

He waited as had the occupants of that Center for the man to come in and tell the story of that strange light patch against the red sand. In the morning a searching party brought in his body. The story would never be told by him.

Nor by any other Earthman, it seemed. Later, a spaceship again sighted the mist, and radioed that it was landing to investigate. Again, Earthmen, now frightened and grim, waited through the Martian night. Once more, a daylight searching party found only the dead.

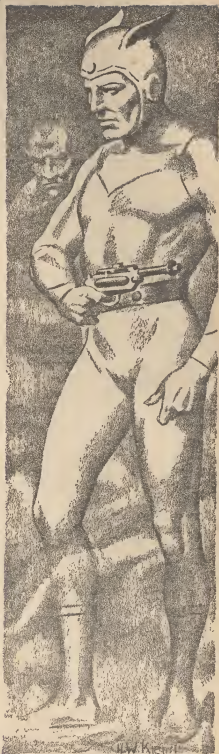
"Ain't fer human understandin'," one superstitious miner whispered in awed tones. "Twenty year I bin on this cursed planet—nor ever heerd the like o' this."

"It's clear enough for me," answered a pink-cheeked youngster up to Mars to make a fortune in rich ore dust. "I stay off the desert at night. Only the miserable Martians can live out there then."

"Justice from the Crypt," a third muttered, quoting the threat of an old Martian, dying from wounds he'd received fighting Earthmen. "It's like from the grave—this mist, the way it creeps from the sand white and ghostly!"

That was the spirit Barry Williams, special investigator for the Terrestrial Bureau of Martian Affairs, found when he arrived. Behind the fear were rumors, dead bodies, nothing more. At first, he'd blamed superstition and the natural hazards of work in the desert. But now he was here in the desert at night, waiting.

IT WASN'T for this he'd been sent to Mars, Barry told himself half-angrily. His mission here was important. But this threat to all Terrestrials on Mars was



Williams waited, seeing her come through the mists,

ominous. There were no government agencies to deal with the threat here. Mars was just a frontier where untold riches lay for the taking beneath some of the red sand.

The sullen, cowed Martians, working at the bigger mines, or following their nomadic courses across the desert no longer attempted an organized government. Despite their great majority in numbers, the Martians played no part in running the planet. How they must be rejoicing now, Barry thought, as death stalked their conquerors, death striking from the desert in the night.

Suddenly, Williams felt an icy tingle course through his blood. His hand dropped again to his ray gun, tore it from the holster. He stood erect, fighting an urge to crouch low against the danger.

Along the crest of the sand-swell before him, something was rising. Bright moonlight shimmered as the rays broke against a pale barrier.

To the right, the left, behind him, it was the same. The white mist was rising, surrounding him. Escape was cut off. Even to reach his nearby spaceship was impossible without cutting through. Barry tried to relax. There was nothing to do but wait.

He remembered the words of the old Martian desert wanderer to whom he'd spoken. This man had once been a chieftain, before the conquest of Mars by Earth. His keen black eyes had bored into Barry.

"If you wish the answer," he'd advised, "go into the desert at night. *You* are different—you may return. I can tell you no more."

Thicker grew the mist. A silver blanket, wrapping closer and closer about Barry Williams. The moons and the barren landscape were blotted out. All perspective vanished. High above, a tiny patch of stars was visible—perhaps for the last time to Williams.

He gripped the ray gun tighter. The strange white blanket touched his skin now—seemed to press against him with a great weight. He raised the gun grimly, then a picture flashed into his mind.

One of the bodies that had come out of the desert had been shown him. The

dead fingers still gripped a ray gun. They had crushed against the trigger for a long time—until the badly overheated weapon had at last burned out, charring the unfeeling hand that had held it. But the power that had brought oblivion had stood up against the ray.

With a grim smile, Barry replaced his weapon. The blanket was tight around him now. He could see nothing. His limbs grew numb under overpowering lethargy. His lungs labored, sucking in the mist. Consciousness wavered. He reeled, stiffly. His muscles hardened, his braced feet sinking deep into the sand.

Before his glazing eyes, a strange picture formed in the mist. A beautiful Martian maiden, tall, slim, majestic—veiled in silver mesh. On her lovely features was a look of stern judgment.

WAS IT FANCY, or did the chanting of voices ring in his ears, muffled weirdly by the shroud about him? "Day—ees—a—nocta—— Day—ees—a—nocta."

The picture, the sounds faded. At last his knees sagged. He pitched face downward into the red sand.

For what seemed a long time, Barry Williams floated in darkness. Then, to a tiny corner of his mind, consciousness returned. He fought to retain it. The mist,



he realized dimly, did not harm the body—it paralyzed. While he could think, the battle was not lost. He called upon the deep reserves of his mind.

Suddenly he was aware of sand digging painfully into the skin of his face—the first physical sensation he'd know since he slumped forward into oblivion. Hands tugged at his body, and the sting of the sand was gone from his nostrils. He had been rolled over onto his back.

Wild hope surged through Barry. He struggled against the leaden weight on his eyelids—without success. His muscles did not respond. He tried to move an arm—a leg—a finger. It was no use. Slowly, he realized what had happened.

Some power ruled his mind—had overcome it while he was unconscious. For some reason, he had been *allowed* to regain a very limited consciousness—just so much and no more! Perhaps he would learn the answer to this mystery. Why had the white mist not destroyed him?

A murmur of voices beat against his ears. He'd been given back his hearing! The voices were low, soft. They spoke in a language foreign to him—Martian he guessed. Words faded away. There was a moment's silence, then the chant he had heard before.

Above Barry, a voice spoke to him in inter-planetary Esperanto:

"Son of Earth, you are not as the other Earthmen who come here to rob this unhappy planet, and slay its children."

The voice was that of a woman, clear, musical, unutterably sweet—pathetically sad. It paused; spoke again. A new note crept into the words, ringing, thrilling:

"Go your way—leave in peace, but travel far from this planet. The Mist of Mars will destroy all those who remain to despoil and murder here."

Williams felt consciousness slipping from him once more. He struggled to speak. He must speak! These people must be told of his mission here!

But his lips would not move. Struggle was useless. Feeling was gone from his body. The last sound he heard was the voice of a man, deep and full:

"Heed the warning of the Mother of Mist. This once you have been spared."

II

BARRY opened his eyes as the red sun climbed over the rim of the rolling desert. His head was clear, his mind refreshed and alert. These symptoms strengthened his convictions that he'd been hypnotized.

The power of a highly trained mind was being used in this campaign against Earthmen. Perhaps the mist was produced both to hide the operator and to frighten the victim—making the latter easier prey to force that invaded the brain, and had literally torn out the life essence of the other victims.

Shrugging off further speculation for the moment, Barry climbed painfully to his feet. His muscles were stiff and cramped from lying hours on the ground. He flexed his arms and legs, worked his fingers, getting out the soreness. Then he started for his spaceship.

As the rockets throbbed behind him, Barry tried all the controls. The little ship whipped through every intricate maneuver he'd ever known. It slowed his progress, this senseless stunting, but it showed him the ship was in prime condition, answering his every touch on the controls.

Why was he doing this? It was as if he were going on a trip. Yet he had no such intention. The mist had spared him, and was gone.

The mist! The thought brought the answer to his strange preparations—hypnosis again—post-hypnotic suggestion!

Having spared him and ordered him to flee the planet, the being behind the mist had meant him to remember the advice.

Barry's lips set in a straight line, and hard little muscles stood out on his cheek, along his strong jaw. He hadn't the slightest intention of fleeing Mars. He'd been sent here for a purpose by the Terrestrial Government, and he had come to realize the whole deadly threat of this Martian scourge against Earthmen was tied up with the reason for his being here. Barry Williams was staying on Mars till he'd finished his job.

Below him, the circular, thick-walled, high-domed Center flashed over the horizon and loomed larger in the lower view-

plate before Barry on the control board. Soon he was close enough to see the narrow apertures, where, in the early days of Terrestrial occupation, mighty ray cannon had blasted against bands of Martians who still had crude weapons to use against the victors.

Barry put his ship down neatly in a semi-circular row of other craft. There were, he noticed, more ships parked outside than was usual for a post not close to the bigger mine. One of them was a large, ornate cruiser type, on which was painted in neat gold letters: "*Grey Enterprises, Inc.*"

It was the personal, space-going ship of Craig Grey, billionaire ore-king, himself. The latter was probably inside the Center. That would account for the unusual number of ships, for Grey never travelled anywhere without a large following.

As Barry stepped through the door-lock onto the field, a small knot of men, dressed for travel, stopped outside the building door. They stared open-mouthed at the Government identification letters on Barry's craft, then at him.

Obviously, they'd turned and bolted inside—with a speed and singleness of purpose that seemed like panic!

Puzzled, Barry pushed aside the heavier, outer door. From inside, an excited murmuring of voices came through the second door.

SILENCE fell over the big room within, as he entered. Every man there, most of them free-lance ore-seekers, was in the crowd pressing around one man who stood against the bar. That man was easily recognizable, for his picture had been printed from Mercury to Pluto. He was Craig Grey. A subordinate stood on each side of him, keeping the others at a respectable distance.

Grey looked at Barry with bleak, cold eyes. The ore-king was a dapper little man, who apparently fought his advanced years with the aid of science. His hair was coal black, as was the tapering, precise mustache—though both should have been gray long ago. He lifted a well-manicured hand, and sucked on a cigarette through a long holder. Despite his culture and small stature, Barry Williams sensed that this

man could be a deadly enemy.

The glowing cigarette in its long holder swept out in a graceful arc toward the men Barry had seen outside. "This is the searching party that was about to set out for you, Williams," said Grey in a flat, thin voice. "A spaceship reported seeing you last night on the desert—with the white mist closing in."

"Very decent of you fellows to worry," Williams said amiably. "I came in under my own power."

His words fell into a silence that was tenser than before. They had just been discussing him, Williams was positive. Grey, who had never seen him, had known his name!

Barry said nothing. He waited calmly for the answer to this odd reception. Somehow, he sensed hostility in the Earthmen here.

Beneath the poised, still friendly gaze of his blue eyes, the others grew restless. Feet shuffled. Murmurs came from the rear of the group.

"These Martian savages are behind this mist."

"They're out to kill all us Earthmen," came another voice.

And a third questioned: "How could a man get out of that mist alive?"

"Unless he's a friend of those killers," finished another.

The color of Barry's eyes deepened into the blue-grey of carbon steel. "I owe explanations only to Earth Government!" he snapped. "Is that clear?"

Murmurs rose again—angry now, and the faces of the men grew dark and menacing. But Grey waved his long cigarette holder for silence. He was the unquestioned leader on Mars. His company owned most of the largest mines.

He spoke coolly: "What you say may be true, Williams, but we feel we've a right to some answer. After all, my company has billions invested here. And these men," his gesture took in the miners and ore-seekers, "have their lives invested. All of us are threatened by this mist."

"Fair enough," said Barry Williams. "I'll be glad to tell you, since you're asking."

He told them briefly of his encounter with the mist. When he'd finished, the taut silence in which they'd listened was

snapped by angry mutterings. This time the anger seemed directed against the accusations of the Martian maiden, rather than against Barry.

"Those savages calling us *murderers*!"

CRAIG GREY'S voice was scornful. "Ridiculous of course. These creatures are human only in superficial resemblance." He drew deeply through his long holder, and blew a great cloud of smoke toward Barry. "Of course, *you* know that Earth laws have declared them savages, and provided that none save humans of Earth descent can hold property on Mars, or citizenship in the Earth state. How could we murder or rob them—since they're not human and own nothing?"

"True—and interesting," conceded Williams. "I know too the laws were passed on suggestion of exploring parties sent here by three big inter-planetary combines, of which your own was the largest. That was fifty years ago. You were at the head of your company then—excuse me for giving your age away." Williams was speaking slowly, thinking his way. Some of the puzzle of Mars was unfolding as he spoke, against this background of resentful Earthmen.

"Those laws gave you and your friends control of great wealth in the ore mines. You broke the resistance of the Martians, and used some as cheap labor in the mines. The others had to find ore dust and sell it to you for a song, to buy food and other things from you at your price. And they had to avoid being shot by ore-seekers who wanted the dust."

Again the other men growled toward Barry.

"Martian lover!"

"Justice from the Crypt, eh? We'll send you back there!"

"Tain't murder or robbery to kill savages!"

"Go running back to Earth with that phoney story."

"No!" he answered them. "I'm not leaving Mars until I finish my job. The Bureau of Martian Affairs sent me here to see if some educational program could be started among the Martian savages. I think it could. These people could pass for Earth citizens in the streets of Washington itself. As soon as I get to the bot-

tom of the mist, and stop it, I'll be ready to go back with my recommendation.

The men began to surge toward Barry. Apprehension, as well as anger showed in their faces. What he suggested would mean the end of their chances to exploit the planet and its people so freely—and of Mars as a frontier.

"I don't think you'll get away with this, Williams," Craig Grey said softly. "You've admitted being on the side of the Martians who are trying to kill us!"

"I'll put the first man who raises a hand under arrest," said the other just as softly.

"That's a bluff I'll call," snarled a big man. He was one of the subordinates who'd stood beside the ore-king. Now he hulked forward, hand dropping slowly toward the belt where two ray guns dangled. "You won't be arresting anyone! Every Earthman on Mars will be after you—just like I am!"

"I'll have to take your weapons," Barry began. To exert his authority as a representative of Earth Government now might save the situation—if he could make it stick.

But an ugly look, spreading across the big man's face, pulling at his thick lips and blazing from his eyes was the answer. It was the look of a murderer, and there was no mistaking his intention as he brought up a ray gun.

"You can have them—this way," he sneered. The other men in the Center scattered for cover, their faces relieved that the threat Barry represented was to be so quickly removed.

But Earth Investigators were well trained. Barry Williams' ray crossed the other. The big man fell, life burned out of him. Barry swung the weapon in his hand significantly about the men.

"If this is the way you want it, there's an example of what will happen to anyone else who tries to stop me. And don't forget, I represent the authority of Earth Government!"

He backed toward the door, watching them warily. "It won't be wise for the rest of you to try to follow me!"

Outside, he made for his ship at a dead run. Ray beams were splashing into the red sand at his feet, when he entered the

port. Safe behind the apertures of the Center, the men were trying to cut him down.

BARRY blasted his ship into the air, and watched the Center grow small behind and below him. His lips were set in a straight, tight line, while his mind went over his position.

Grey would fan the hostility of all the Earthmen on Mars against him. Barry was sure from what he'd seen of the Martians that they were far from the savages they'd been called by explorers financed by Grey and his associates. They were an intelligent peaceful race, uneducated and unadvanced, but intelligent.

Earth Government had been misled into oppressing them, and Grey had profited enormously. The ore-king would stop at nothing to keep Barry Williams from destroying the set-up. Already he'd connected Barry with the white mist, a Martian attempt to win freedom and revenge—an attempt that Barry must stop!

The white mist meant the killing of Earthmen, and the rebellion would convince Earth Government that the Martians were savages. Barry Williams wanted to save human lives—even the lives of those who were murdering and robbing on Mars under the flimsy pretext of these laws. And he wanted to see justice done on Mars.

These things were not very probable, though, Barry knew. Grey's clever move had trapped him on Mars. He hadn't enough fuel in his ship to reach Earth, nor was his radio strong enough to contact the planet. With the Earthmen trying to kill him, he'd be unable to get supplies. And the Martians had warned him to leave the planet—a second time the white mist might not spare him!

Still, his only chance was to reach the Martians who were behind the white mist. If he could convince them of his intentions—he had to convince them! Then they might help him reach Earth; and hold off their ominous attacks against Earthmen until he could put the situation before the Government of Earth. If he could manage that, Barry was sure he could save human lives and do justice on Mars!

He had to find the Martians! Barry brought his ship down low over the red

sand and started his search. He knew that hostile Earthmen, armed to the teeth and intent on killing him, were searching also.

Their search was successful, while he still looked vainly for Martians. Not even a nomadic wandering native was moving over the sands. And the blazing midday of the red planet brought the end of Barry Williams' opportunity.

"These natives know something is up," he was musing. Above him, the sun was a ball of flame, its rays blistering, blinding through the thin atmosphere.

It was out of this blind spot that a voice snapped across Barry's thoughts like a whiplash: "The game's up, Williams."

He knew then that his thoughts had left him open to attack.

"You heard me, Williams."

The latter knew that cold, precise voice. It was Craig Grey. Barry could not see the ship, but he knew the ore-king's cruiser would be hovering high above, safely out of sight in the sun's rays. And from that focal point of his enemies, the ether began to crackle with orders.

Other craft began to converge rapidly on the spot, very close to where the investigator had the white mist. They ringed Barry as the mist had, closed in. Their blazing ship rays, in the nose of each craft, formed spokes to a wheel of which Barry Williams' ship was to be the hub.

He charged into that ring, broke it! He scattered them before him, some of them dropping downward with blazing hulls.

But, as often as he drove them before him, Grey's cold, hard face appeared in the visa-radio. His commands reformed the others, brought them back to the attack.

Finally, as Barry fought off another encirclement, the space cruiser of Craig Grey dropped unseen from above. Four red rays reached toward the investigator's ship, closed about it like the fingers of a hand.

Barry had no chance to turn and make the prolonged ray contact it would have taken to damage the big, heavily-armored ship. His control board indicators flashed a bitter message in his eyes—his ship was lost! In the visa-plate before him, was Grey's exulting face, the long cigarette holder clamped between the thin, smiling lips. Above, like good dogs closing for the kill, the ships were following Barry down behind the pack-leading cruiser.



III

WILLIAMS got his wrecked craft on an even keel somehow, and spun her with his side jets to keep her even. His trip down was an incredibly swift repetition of these movements, designed to land the ship on the red sands with a cushioning belly-smack.

They were following him down to make sure he did not escape the crash alive—to ray the smashed ship into an incandescent heap of metal! At the last moment, Barry stretched out a leg, and kicked hard at the emergency door-lock lever release.

Whipped open by the air-wash, the door was waiting as he leaped from the seat. With a last look at the viewscreen—showing the red terrain flashing into his face—he spun out into the air a second before the crash. Darkness swept over him as he landed!

It was not the darkness of unconsciousness. He'd landed on his back, pulled by steel muscles into an arc that rocked the impact from his hurtling body.

But, somehow, a covering was over his eyes, and two men lay beside him, one on either side. They spoke softly to each other over his head in a language Barry recognized but could not understand; Martian!

He'd found the Martians all right, the hard way! But Grey and his men would ray them all out of existence in a matter of seconds. Overhead the rockets of the ore-king's ships thundered closer. They'd

seen his body hurtle from the wreck, and were searching! He wished the Martians hadn't blindfolded him.

An intolerable glare from many ray beams beat through the covering over his eyes. This was it! The heat of those beams brought sweat through every pore of his body, but that was all. The drumming of rocket jets receded. They were leaving!

Why hadn't they seen him? They'd rayed his ship into a heap of molten metal that warmed him where he lay, yards away. But he and his captors were unhurt. Apparently, Grey and his men had decided they'd been wrong about seeing the investigator jump. They'd decided he was still in the wreckage. But why hadn't they seen Grey and the Martians?

The question was quickly answered. As the thrumming of rockets died in the distance, the two Martians pulled Barry to his feet. He blinked as sunlight struck his eyes, and looked about. The three of them were standing in the open, but a large square of rough cloth at their feet explained why the ships above hadn't spotted them. It was colored to blend into the red sand so perfectly it was almost invisible to Barry.

His respect for Martians leaped! A peaceful race they had been, before they were attacked and conquered. But now they were showing how fast they could learn. They'd mastered one of the most effective stratagems of warfare, camouflage.

The clothing of his Martian captors was

the same color as the cloth that had covered them, even to masks over the face. One of them tugged at Barry's arm and spoke softly in Martian. They wanted him to go with them. He went gladly. If they took him to their headquarters, he'd have the chance he wanted—to ask their help, and offer them his! His heart was beating wildly. Grey and his followers would learn that Earth Government had an answer for fraud and injustice!

His respect for the Martians increased again, when he was taken through a cleverly concealed passage into a sandwell. Inside was a rough room, ingeniously hewn and held from collapsing inward.

Here were three more Martians, garbed as his captors were. One sat before a visaradio. This group of Martians was well organized! They'd salvaged equipment from wrecked and abandoned ships.

ONE of Barry's companions went to the radio and spoke rapidly in Martian, apparently reporting. The view screen was blank, but Barry heard the Martian use the word, "Deisanocta," and something clicked in his mind! The chanting he'd heard last night in the mist, "Day-ess-a-nocta!" Was it the name of the lovely Martian girl, she who seemed to be the leader of these men? One of them had spoken of her respectfully as the Mother of Mist.

It was she he wanted to speak to, Barry Williams realized. And it was her voice that struck his ears a moment later, answering the report of the man! Her words were soft, gentle yet commanding. There was a timbre to her throaty voice that moved Barry, brought him a picture of her large, somber grey eyes against the clear white of her face.

"Deisanocta," he cried, starting suddenly forward. "I must speak to you!"

His captors seized him roughly. Their faces were horrified. Barry realized he had probably violated some form of Martian royal etiquette—for this girl was undoubtedly a Martian princess. There had been royalty on Mars when the Earthmen came, although the line had been believed destroyed during the conquest.

Again the soft voice came into the room through the radio, still speaking in Martian. A few words, and the instrument clicked dead.

"Wait!" cried Barry. But it was useless. The girl had ignored him, and cut the connection.

Two of the Martians held Barry Williams firmly, although no longer roughly. Another had gone to a little cabinet.

He came toward Barry, a hypodermic needle in his hand. Struggle was useless. Barry extended his arm with a smile, and saw admiration in the other's eyes.

There was a sharp, momentary pain in his arm as the needle was expertly inserted. Then a sensation of well-being, flooded the Earthman. A warmth flowed through his veins, and pounded a flush into his face. There was nothing else.

The Martian went back to the cabinet, came again toward Barry. This time he extended his hand, in the palm of which lay two white tablets. The look on the Martian's face was clear. Barry Williams must take them, of his free will or forcibly.

Again Barry accepted graciously, and saw the Martians smile in approval. He gulped down the tablets. It was only brief seconds later that he sagged toward the ground. There was no sensation save a weariness, a heaviness of his limbs and eyes. Darkness rolled over him, soft and deep and comfortable blackness.

BARRY WILLIAMS' will tugged at his eyelids, as his consciousness returned. They responded sluggishly, reluctantly. His muscles, too, resisted, with a numbness that revealed he'd slept a long time. Beneath him, the red sand of the Martian desert was his couch.

When, finally, his blue eyes focused, he saw nothing; nothing save a white blanket that folded about him on every side—the mist! Struggling to his feet, he moved stiffly a few steps, to the right, the left, forward, back.

There was nothing anywhere except that blanket of mist. No stars, no bright moons! The sand at his feet was almost obscured by the silvery curtain.

Barry's mind was clearing, and he stopped short with a sudden realization. Yesterday—or had it been yesterday, there was no telling if it was night or day—the mist had oppressed his senses, brought him to his knees paralyzed and helpless! Yet, now, it had no effect.

He breathed deeply, remembering how

his lungs had labored and his mind reeled the last time. But the mist was refreshing as the purest air, and his mind remained clear.

The hypodermic they'd given him! It must be an antidote to the drug that was in the mist—for Barry was now sure the mist was a depressive drug, meant to paralyze and terrify. The dead Earthmen had not died from the mist itself, but from some power that struck under cover of that terror!

But the Martians had immunized him! Barry shrugged. Perhaps he'd convinced them he was a friend, and they'd stamped him with this immunity that all their fellows might know him from the other Earthmen who were enemies—

The thought brought a sudden chill to Barry Williams' spine! He'd been walking, first slowly, then, as his legs lost their stiffness, more and more rapidly. Yet, still the mist was all about him. Never in its ghostlike appearances before had the mist covered more than a small patch of the desert!

These thoughts began to add together in his mind. Immunizing him—a fiend, putting him to sleep so that he would be unable to argue or resist until he could be safely disposed of, the extent of the mist. All this could mean—

"This is it," Barry groaned aloud. "This is the revolt!

"The first appearances of the mist were to terrorize, and to test! This is the real thing; the mist over the whole surface of Mars, organized Martians striking under its cover!"

His words came back to him from the hateful white blanket, muffled and run together into unintelligible echoes.

"You failed—failed!" the echoes seemed to mutter. "Earthmen will die—Earth troops will come against the 'savages.' No justice for Mars!"

Barry shook his head angrily against his imaginings. Suddenly, he stumbled and pitched forward over something at his feet.

His heart sank at sight of the gruesome thing in the sand. A dead Earthman—but not unmarked as had been the earlier victims of the white mist. This man had been killed by violence, killed as he lay unconscious, overcome by the mist drug!

"This is it," Barry groaned again. An-

other form of death was striking under the silver blanket. This man had been a murderer and exploiter, but to Earth Government he was a citizen killed by savages!

Barry Williams stumbled on dazedly. There was nothing he could do! He stumbled over another body and passed on. A third form appeared in the sand at his feet. He started to turn aside, then stopped.

QUICKLY he bent over the figure, his hand going to the pulse. There was a heartbeat, and the chest moved slightly with breathing! This body was alive, there were no wounds. Peering into the face, Barry realized it was a Martian!

A Martian overcome by the mist. After puzzling a moment, Barry laughed. Of course! All the natives couldn't have been in on the plans—not even most of them. Therefore, they'd be drugged and put to sleep like the Earthmen.

Martians overcome by the means that was to free them! Barry's mind was racing. Free them! That was it! They'd be needed for the fighting. The other Martians, the organized ones under Deisanocta, would come to give immunizing injections to such of their fellows as this one Barry found on the sand!

With the realization, Barry Williams threw himself down on the ground. He couldn't be far from the place they'd captured him. That meant, the vicinity of the Martian Princess' headquarters. Perhaps she herself would come, searching for her followers.

She did. She came silently, short minutes later, moving like a wraith in her silver mesh costume, that somehow made her seem part of the mist. Mother of Mist. Barry remembered the title.

The silver accents of her voice came clearly to his ears. She spoke in Martian. Two of her men appeared beside her. One went toward the fallen Martian, something in his hand that Barry knew would be a hypodermic syringe. The other saw Barry, started toward him.

"Hold everything!" Barry leaped up. "I am no enemy."

The other paused, he knew there could be only one Earthman who walked through the mist unharmed. Barry's eyes went to Deisanocta.

"Princess, I must speak to you!"

She came closer, until her face was clear before him. Her grey eyes glowed softly. "I know of your mission here, Barry Williams," she said in her throaty voice. "Your mind was open to me when first we met in the mist."

It had been she who hypnotized him! Barry nodded slowly, he'd suspected as much. "Then you must know I want to help your people. This fighting must stop. I promise you that, if I can reach Earth—if you will help me get a ship and fuel—I can win justice and freedom for your people!"

The girl's eyes flashed. "A free Mars will make its own peace with Earth," she cried. Here was the spirit not of savages—but of a free race Earth could respect! Her voice softened. "But thank you, Barry Williams. You have been spared because your purpose here was friendly, and because I—I—trust you."

"Now." Her eyes glowed from deep within, "You will sleep, Barry Williams, sleep the walking sleep under my will."

BARRY met her gaze, feeling the impact of her mind. For long moments, his eyes were locked with hers. A puzzled doubt appeared at last on her features.

"Sleep, Barry Williams," she murmured uncertainly.

"Sorry," he grinned. "There's no more power in the mist over my will—and you can't hypnotize me against my will. Hypnotism is a new art with your people, Princess. You forgot to condition me to your commands."

Deisanocta smiled. "An old Earthman implanted the science in my mind when I was but a child, being hidden from the oppressors. Much that is there, I do not know how to use."

"Won't you let me help you," asked Barry Williams. "If you ignore my advice, that's up to you."

She considered his words. Her eyes on his still glowed, but with a different light. "Very well," she said at last. "You may stay with me. After victory, you can be my emissary to Earth."

Barry walked beside her, the Martians of her party following respectfully behind.

"Why don't you take these men prisoners," Barry asked, "instead of killing them?"

Deisanocta answered sadly: "My people have been killed and beaten too long. I could not restrain them."

"Besides, these men could be dangerous. If some of my mist-producing units failed, those who sleep in that area would awaken after a few breaths of air. We would have enemies behind us." She smiled a little wistfully. "These Earthmen do not sleep as deeply as you did from those pills."

"You must capture Craig Grey alive," he said with sudden realization. "While he sleeps under the influence of the mist, you can hypnotize him. Then we can learn the details of his fraud, how he deceived Earth about your people! With names and facts, we can convict him—prove his guilt!"

"It shall be so," she promised. "Even now my followers are awakening those of our people who sleep. When all are gathered, we will move into the mine headquarters and the forts. We go slowly, for some of our enemies will be in spaceships, safe from the mist drug. But we will take enough weapons as we go to overcome them!"

"I hope," Barry muttered.

Deisanocta seemed not to hear him. Her grey eyes were alight, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

"The hour is very near," she said. "Mars shall be free!"

"Come, I must speak with my men."

She led the way toward a nearby sandswell, moving with that marvelous sense of direction that seemed a characteristic of Martians. For generations, they had made their way unerringly over the trackless desert. Now, even in the mist blanket that made objects invisible short feet away, the Princess did not falter.

Straight to a cleverly concealed door she walked, through, and into the same type of room Barry Williams had seen before. At her entrance, a Martian lowered his ready heat ray and stood respectfully for her commands.

IV

DEISANOCTA walked to the visaradio, clicked it on. This time she switched in the view screen also. Her white hands spun dials, and she began to speak in Martian, calmly, insistently.

The view screen took on depth and color. She adjusted condensing levers and it divided into a dozen smaller squares. Slowly each square filled, until the faces of a dozen Martian men looked out at her—silent, waiting faces, behind each of which the white mist formed a backdrop.

Deisanocta's red lips twitched, and her lovely eyes leaped into sudden flame. For a moment, she was silent. Barry could feel tension building up in the room, and see it in the faces of those who looked out of the screen.

Then the Princess spoke a single short sentence in her own tongue. Barry Williams did not need an interpretation. The meaning of the command was clear in its ringing syllables; "Strike for Mars!"

Twenty-four eyes blazed from the screen—the eyes of twelve field commanders flashing hatred of their oppressors and fierce exultation that the hour of revenge was here! From each throat rose the same word, spoken in awe, reverence, resolution. "Deisanocta!"

Thus they saluted their leader, the Mother of Mist, Queen-to-be of Mars! Then the screen was blank.

"In short minutes Mars will belong again to its people, Barry Williams," said the girl softly. "We wait here for the report of my commanders."

She sank to a sitting position on the red sand, arranging the silver mesh of her dress about her slim body. Barry did likewise, as did the Martian.

Minutes dragged by. The radio screen glowed softly, but remained blank. Barry felt the muscles gather in his arms and shoulders. This idle waiting was hard to bear. If he could only be in there fighting—

Deisanocta was finding it difficult to wait, too. The eager glow of anticipation had died away in her beautiful eyes. They were reflective, reminiscent.

"All my life I've been trained for this moment," she said, at last. "Deep in the Crypt, burial ground of our race, the Elders hid and taught me."

"In the Crypt!" exclaimed Barry. "Then the dying Martian knew of you when he threatened 'Justice from the Crypt!'"

"Hardly," she smiled. "That was twenty years before I was born—ten years after the first Earthmen came to Mars.

"He couldn't even have known that my parents were hidden there. They were still young, the last of Martian royalty, hidden away by a few faithful servants."

"What did he mean then?"

She shook her head, the black tresses gleaming faintly under the mist. "We never knew."

"Tell me about this Crypt," Barry asked. "And tell me more about your people."

"The Crypt is our ancient burial place. It is underground, dry, and our dead are safe there from animals that would find bodies the shifting sand would not protect.

"Always, we laid our dead to rest there, until Craig Grey placed guards at the doors and forbade the practice."

"He was afraid some weapon was hidden there," reasoned Barry Williams. "It's the only thing the dying Martian's threat could mean."

"What weapon could be there?" Deisanocta asked mournfully. "Our people were always peaceful. They lived beside the wells, growing the food they ate. It took Earthmen to teach them to hate and kill—to know that ore dust was worth blood!"

"Does your written history give no clue of a time when the Crypt was anything but a burial place?"

"Our people knew nothing of writing. That, too, we learned from Earthmen, my Elders learned it in secret and taught me."

"And they developed the white mist there in the Crypt, and brought the old Earthman who taught you hypnotism?" Barry asked. He pictured her frightened childhood among the dead, in the darkness so close to Craig's guards who would have killed her on sight.

THE GIRL read his expression. "It was not so terrible," she said wistfully. "There was peace, we were not tortured for ore dust, or made to slave in mines. It is light there, even deep down; for the walls are radioactive.

"But my parents died of hearts broken by the suffering of their people. It was later that the white mist was developed, and I learned that my mission was to use it!"

A faint noise broke into their conversation—a clicking that was suddenly almost thunderous in their ears as every other

sound died!" It was the radio receptor signal.

In the screen, the twelve squares were filling again. The time for reports had come—and there had been no special report of victory.

Silence held, while the twelve faces grew into sharp focus. Barry noted that at least three of the men had not been among the twelve who last faced their Princess. The faces of the rest were dirty, tired, depressed. A couple were bandaged. Before a word was spoken, Barry Williams knew that the news would be bad, and premonition turned his stomach into a leaden ball.

In the screen, the twelve tired faces were silent, waiting. They were wooden, unmoving, until Deisanocta spoke, calmly, questioningly.

One after another, came the reports. Each was brief, and although Barry could not understand the Martian words, he knew that he had been right. The news was bad.

Deisanocta's face paled as she listened. Deep in her eyes raged a conflict of emotions, dismay, sorrow, anger. When the last report was heard, she spoke again.

There was no hesitation in the throaty accents. Words followed each other in a torrent that slowly swept away the numbness from the twelve faces before her! When she had finished, her commanders were again eager, their eyes flashing, exulting.

"Deisanocta! Deisanocta!" came their chant, a promise of victory. Again they faded from the screen to carry out her orders.

When the girl turned from the screen, some of the confidence had slipped from her. Her dark head was bowed, and her slim figure had lost some of its proud erectness.

"Grey's men were waiting for the attack," she told Barry. "They wore space suits!

"We waited too long—until he discovered how to protect his men from the mist. Many of my followers have died in battle. We have not won a single objective!"

"I am sincerely sorry," he said slowly. "Sorry that some of your people have died; sorry that you have failed."

Her head snapped up, color flooding the pale cheeks. "We have not lost! The

mist that covers Mars will remain. My men have surrounded the enemy. They will harass his every move.

"Let Grey wait for another attack—wait until his oxygen tanks are empty, and his space suits useless! Then the mist will triumph!"

BARRY WILLIAMS shook his head sadly. "Can the mist reach up to the end of atmosphere," he asked, "where their ships can go to compress clear air? And, if so, can the mist reach across space to Earth, from where Grey's freighters can bring compressed air?"

"I wonder if I read your mind rightly," Deisanocta said scornfully. "I wonder if you are the friend of Mars I thought you."

He crossed to her in two quick steps. His hands gripped her elbows, drawing her up to face the intensity of his eyes. "Yes, I am a friend of Mars! That's why I'm here—that's why Grey and his men hunt me as they do you!"

She shook herself free. The flush of anger in her cheeks had deepened into a flaming crimson. Her eyes avoided him. "Then do not try to discourage me, Barry Williams. The mist will remain."

He was silent, the plan he'd been about to suggest unspoken. If he was distrusted, this was no time to propose it.

Overhead, they heard the thrumming of rockets. Barry smiled mirthlessly. "Grey has his scouts out."

"They will see nothing in the mist," Deisanocta said confidently. But she turned to the radio and contacted her field captains. "It is the same everywhere," she told him. "The enemy's ships circle helplessly overhead."

"I don't like it," Barry said. "If I know Craig Grey, he's up to something. Those ships aren't up there without a reason."

Deisanocta ignored this, her eyes speaking plainly her disappointment in the Earthman she'd believed a friend. Instead of answering him, she turned to the Martian who had waited so patiently and silently for her orders.

"We will eat," she said haughtily to Barry, after a few swift words to the other. "Perhaps Earth food will revive your courage."

"Thank you," Barry ignored the slur,

and sat down beside her where the Martian was spreading a cloth on the ground.

The thrumming of rockets died away as they began, and the Princess glanced significantly at Barry Williams. He turned to the food in silence, a frown of concentration on his forehead.

They had dried horse meat from Earth, the staple dish of the natives, a poor grade of canned corn that was like a thin mush, and hard, wafer-thin pieces of bread.

"My courageous followers won these provisions in battle," Deisanocta said softly.

Barry was finding even the unappetizing menu inviting. He ate rapidly, being careful not to work too deeply into what he knew was a slender store of food. The girl watched him as she nibbled at her food. The scorn in her face slowly faded into sad reproach.

It wasn't until the Princess poured a glass of liquid and set it before Barry, that the far-away look was swept from his eyes by sudden understanding. The liquid was Martian Wrin, a delicious, invigorating drink from native roots, much coveted and seldom obtained by Terrestrials. Even through the white mist that shrouded them, it sparkled from ruby depths. The color galvanized Barry Williams.

"RED!" he exclaimed. "*Infra-red!* Grey's ships were sweeping the desert with infra-red rays, and taking photographs with film sensitive only to those rays. When those prints are developed, he'll have the location of every mist-producing unit that's on Mars, and of your followers!"

"I don't understand," stammered the bewildered Deisanocta. "I know nothing of these things."

"Just believe me," he pleaded. "Order your men and the mist units to move at once!"

Deisanocta moved to the radio and obeyed. Barry Williams' heart leaped. She believed in him, her recent doubt forgotten before the vigor of his arguments.

"And us?" she asked.

"We're all right, being underground. The infra-red rays won't betray us in the photographs. Listen!"

They heard the sound of rocket jets overhead, and it was magnified, built into

thunder in their ears. The radio was still tuned to the field command radios, and they brought the sound of Grey's rocket ships from every corner of the planet.

Before their eyes, the white mist swirled, and on the view screen were twelve small squares of silver. Suddenly, almost simultaneously, lurid streaks cut across those squares—flaming heat rays, softened into orange by the seething vapor!

Deisanocta gasped. "You were right, Barry Williams! Had my forces not moved, they would have been destroyed."

"But it is Grey who has failed this time!"

Barry faced her slowly. His blue eyes rested on her lovely face, and the words he spoke caught in his throat.

"Grey will wait a short while for the mist to dissipate," he said. "When it does not, he'll go back to the pictures. About every spot where a unit or force was shown, he'll draw a circle. The radius of that circle will be the distance a man can travel on foot from the time the photograph was taken, until the time the ships return a second time."

"Then, one by one, he'll ray the entire area of those circles—concentrating as many ships as necessary for the job."

Deisanocta came very close to him. The pleading in the depths of her eyes shook Barry Williams. Without realizing it, he put out his hands and again grasped her elbows.

This time she did not draw away. She moved closer, until her lips almost brushed his as she spoke. He could feel her slim figure tremble, not with fear, but with struggling to repress the tears that were welling into her grey orbs, the sobs that were fighting her breath!

"Then this is defeat?" she whispered. "My loyal followers wiped out—the mist, our weapon, swept from the planet?"

"The only alternative," he said with sudden fierce tenderness, "is to order the units turned off and buried in the sand. Tell your men to split into small bands and hide in the desert. Their camouflage will protect them from Grey's scouts."

"That way, Grey will think he's won, and your forces will be intact for the future."

Deisanocta's small hand found his and held it as she issued the necessary orders.

WHEN the screen was again blank, Barry Williams spun the dials.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Tuning in Earth on the regular broadcast channels."

"Earth! At this time, Barry Williams, you would listen to Earth broadcasts!"

He turned to her reproachfully. "Don't you trust me yet? I must know how my government is reacting to the situation here; for, if you follow my advice, you and I will be putting the case of the Martians before that government. I still think we have a chance of convincing them. But we'll need to find a spaceship, and take it."

"You are right, Barry Williams," Deisanocta admitted sadly. "You were right in the beginning, and my efforts have only brought failure."

"My heart trusted you—believed in you; and because it was my heart, I mistrusted. I followed my reason instead—and no woman should do that."

"I'm following my heart—have from the beginning," Barry murmured. "And it tells me we haven't lost yet." His hands left her elbows, went about her waist. Behind them, the Martian turned away.

"Revolt of Martian savages," broke in a voice from the radio. They froze, listening to the words that followed; *"Craig Grey, President of rey Enterprises, Incorporated, is present in person at the scene of trouble, directing the heroic resistance of Terrestrial pioneers. He has been authorized by World Government to capture Barry Williams, investigator of the dastardly campaign, dead or alive."*

"Williams disappeared into the desert, and the abortive attack by the savages followed immediately. 'Justice in the Crypt', is said to be the wild battle shout of the Martians. Federal troops have embarked for Mars. It is—"

Barry snapped off the radio. "Grey has pulled off another one!" Deisanocta clung to his hand mutely, her white face revealing the despair the news had brought.

Barry's mouth was a straight, hard line. His eyes flamed, and muscles bunched in his shoulders. After a moment's silence, he turned the radio back on.

"More orders for you, Deisanocta. Get in touch with your men. We want about half a dozen of the best, and tell them to

bring along the oldest Martian they can find!"

"But what—why?"

"If it's 'Justice from the Crypt' they want, we'll give it to them. We're going to find out what's there, and use it!"

"Have your men meet us near one entrance to the place. Tell them to bring a portable visa-radio, so we can call the rest if we need them. This is the only chance we've got left!"

V

OVER the red sands of Mars, the silver mist of vengeance was slowly thinning. The two moons sent their light probing down, breaking through here and there to find and bathe the sand.

Where those rays found the little party that crept cautiously toward the Crypt, it did not betray them under the red camouflage blankets. They moved silently ahead, invisible, determined.

"We are there," Deisanocta whispered at last to Barry Williams, beside her under the cloak. "We must rise and go on foot the rest of the way."

"O.K." he said. He scoured the sky, his sharp blue eyes trying to pierce the mist. "If any ships come over, they won't spot us. The mist is thick here."

"The trick will be to get by the guard at the entrance. We don't want to have to overcome him and risk an alarm."

Deisanocta was speaking to the Martians. They rose with Barry and the Princess, and the little party stayed close together to avoid being separated in the white shroud about them.

A suggestion from Barry, and they formed into single file and moved forward. A sharp-eyed Martian was in the lead.

"We are fortunate," the Princess said. "The guard is away from his post."

"Hurry," ordered Barry. "Inside! If we meet him after we're in, that's too bad for him."

Silently as the whiteness about them, the party filed into the Crypt. It was colder here, for the tunnel sloped sharply downward, and the air was heavier. They had gone only a few steps before the last wisps of the mist disappeared. The heavier air had held it out of the Crypt.

About them, the walls shone with a faint radiance.

"Now!" Barry turned to the girl. The party had been under his command from the beginning. Even the Martians had at last recognized that this Earthman was a leader.

"Hypnotize the old Martian. With a willing subject, you can produce a deep hypnosis. Command him to think of the Crypt, remember every thing he ever heard about it, or saw in it, from the time he was an infant!"

Deisanocta's eyes bored into the rapt, obedient face of the old Martian. She murmured softly, sleepily in their tongue. The other's face slowly smoothed, his eyes going blank.

Her words became sharp, commanding, insistent. Under their leashing, the old one's brow furrowed. He was remembering, digging deep into forgotten recesses of his mind. At last Deisanocta spoke to Barry.

"I see the Crypt seventy years ago. This one was here as an infant in his father's arms.

"It was different. There are fewer bodies. Their clothes are strange. None bear the wounds of battle."

"Remember what we're looking for," snapped Barry.

"I am deep down in the Crypt," came the girl's voice, weaker. "Deeper than even I have ever been. I do not know the part. There is something here, something big—I cannot make it out. It is very faint in this one's mind."

"Tell him to lead us to it," said Barry. "That will save your strength."

Seconds later they were following the old Martian through a labyrinth of tunnels. He moved rapidly, unhesitatingly, his face wooden and intent. Deisanocta was beside Barry, her hand in his.

"Can it be?" she questioned. "Is the answer as simple as this?"

"I hope so," he told her. "It is something you wouldn't have thought of, because you did not remember all you were taught about hypnotism. And no one else could have done it against the old one's will."

"Look!" Deisanocta cried suddenly.

"He has lost his way."

"Impossible," Barry said.

But the old Martian was leading them toward a blank wall. Still he did not hesitate. With steps rapid, certain, he marched directly into the wall. His head struck, and he fell, rolling to their feet.

BARRY bent over him quickly, then rose one hand digging at the wall. "It's soft dirt," he explained. "Didn't hurt him. He's only stunned." He stepped back to Deisanocta.

"That's why Grey did not find whatever is here. It's somewhere behind that wall—cut off by an earth slide!"

"But—what is there?"

"We'll soon find out." Barry's hand dug at the wall, scooping away the soft dirt. "Tell the boys to start digging. But post a couple up the tunnel in both directions, so we won't be surprised."

Four Martians and Barry Williams dug at the wall with cupped hands. It was hot, dirty work in the heavy air of the Crypt. Sweat beaded their faces. Arms ached after the first few minutes.

Barry did not slacken his pace, and the others stayed with him. At last, the Earthman gave a cry of triumph.

"It isn't thick! See, the dirt is crumbling away from us now—falling on the other side." The vigor of their attack redoubled.

Hearing the cries, the Martians posted down the tunnel came running to help. Deisanocta stepped closer, her face radiant. Barry threw her a glance, and his heart noted the way her black hair threw back highlights of the walls' radiance.

His hand shot out again at the wall, viciously, and the last grains of dirt fell inward. Light showed through. Beside him, the others worked frantically. In seconds, the opening was large enough for one of them to pass through.

"Deisanocta," Barry Williams gasped. "Go in. I'll be right behind you."

The rest crowded behind, and all but the unconscious old Martian were soon on the other side. They stared open-mouthed, incredulously at the sight that met them.

It was a great room into which they'd made their way, the walls luminous, and stretching off almost out of view. There were no dead here. Except for one object, the vast chamber was empty.

That object itself was big, black, rear-

ing upward above them halfway to the distant roof.

"A spaceship!" cried Deisanocta.

"The great-grandfather of all space ships," added Barry.

"Look at the size of it, the diameter of those rocket tubes! Used a poor fuel, inefficiently. But they made it. Crashed through the roof of this place. Look at the dark patch overhead, where sand filled in a gap."

"Justice from the Crypt," murmured the girl. "I think I—"

"So do I," rapped Barry. "Come on, you and I are going inside. Tell the others to guard this opening!"

Hand-in-hand, the two of them passed through a yawning port. Beneath their feet, the ramp was solid. Metal did not corrode, in this dry atmosphere. The old ship had not deteriorated in its years here.

Barry Williams and the girl passed down a long passage, unlit except for the faint radioactive radiance that make its way in through smaller portholes. They came to a door, which would not yield to Barry's efforts.

"Locked," he said. "We can't stop for that." His heat ray came out. The beam played against the lock until the metal glowed and ran. Barry kicked at the bottom of the door where the metal was cooler. It swung inward.

"It's the control room," Barry said as their eyes slowly adjusted themselves to the even dimmer light of the room.

Barry's hand groped against the wall beside the door. There was a click, and a yellow radiance sprang from the ceiling. "Even the batteries are still good," he muttered.

"What is this?" Deisanocta cried with a shudder.

THE ROOM was a maze of instruments, levers, panels about the sides. But it wasn't this that had shocked the Princess, it was the bodies.

Two sprawled on the floor, one on its back still held a weapon in one hand. That weapon pointed to the third body.

Slumped in a chair before an instrument panel, the third body had grown rigid, a look of amazement on the undecomposed face. In the right hand, the weapon that

had undoubtedly killed the other two, was still poised.

"You can almost see the smoke curling from the muzzle of that ancient automatic," said Barry grimly. "They fought it out—must have been after the one in the chair landed the ship—and everybody lost!"

"It's—it's horrible," the girl murmured. "Why—"

A sudden commotion, reaching their ears faintly from outside, cut off her question. There were shouts—cries of pain and rage. Running feet pounded up the ship's ramp, came down the passage toward them.

Barry brought up the heat ray in his hand—lowered it as a Martian staggered into the room. He was burned across the face and body.

His pale lips moved. Faint words came forth. Others were choked off as he slumped to the floor. His body sprawled beside the other two already there.

"He says a god comes," Deisanocta explained wildly. "One they cannot harm. The rest of my followers in the room outside have fallen."

Other footsteps sounded at the door. Barry's heat ray came up again. This time its beam sprang across the room, bathed the figure that came through the door with blazing heat.

"No good, Williams," came a sneering voice, metallic through a space suit communicator. "Don't you know impervium when you see it?"

"Yes, I know it," said Barry. His eyes had noted the thin, fragile-looking garment over the space suit that Craig Grey wore. Impervium, fabulous, incredibly expensive, proof against any heat ray. "There's about a dozen suits in the System, and you have to have one!"

Craig Grey's little black eyes snapped with triumph. "A man who fights savages needs one, Williams," he mocked. His glance flickered to Deisanocta, lingered a long minute. "I see now why you went over to the Martians."

Barry took a step toward him, fingers itching. "You—"

Grey brought up his heat ray. "Careful, Williams. You have little enough time to live as it is."

Barry stopped, bafflement stamped on his face. A rash move would leave Deisa-

nocta at the mercy of this man. Craig Grey laughed.

"I figured you could solve the mystery about this place, that's why I told my guards to let you past. I knew you'd come here instead of trying to run to Earth—after I told them of your activities on Mars."

"Grey, you can't get away with this," gritted Barry. He took another step—not toward Grey, but in the direction of Deisanocta.

"Stand still!" snapped the ore king. The weapon in his hand was very steady. "I want to look around."

HIS glittering eyes roamed about the control room. "So this is the secret weapon of the Crypt! I knew it'd be something my boys would be better off not seeing—no chance of a leak this way."

"Earth troops will find it," Barry threatened.

"An atomic bomb will take care of that," the ore-king countered smoothly. "You won't be around to tell them about it, and neither will the girl. I'll keep the secret myself."

Keeping his weapon trained on the two, Grey prowled about the room.

"Here's the ship's log," he thumbed through rapidly, not relaxing his vigilance for an instant. "Hmm. Left Earth in 2085—during the last Continental War. Two scientists, a rich backer—" His hand swept to the body in the chair. "That would be him—rich backers are often seeking power."

"Ship-full of refugees from all lands—average people. Going to establish a Utopian world on Mars." He snapped the book shut.

"Ancestors of your savages, Grey," said Barry quietly.

"Yes," replied the ore-king. "Brains killed each other off in a locked control room—probably the keys to the ship's stores are locked in here with them. That left the others on their own—no sciences, no arts! They just farmed."

"What a clincher you almost had, Williams!"

His heat ray came up, levelled. Barry shuffled another half-step. Craig Grey laughed harshly, his little black eyes sweeping over them.

"I'm a crack shot, Williams. You

can't rush me. But, just to be sure, you'll go first."

The flaming beam of his heat ray cut across the room—and Barry leaped at the same instant. Pain lanced through his left shoulder. But he was not leaping toward Craig Grey—Barry was plunging toward the floor. There was a body there, and he smashed into it—a body with an ancient weapon still clutched in a right, long-dead hand.

Craig Grey backed away a step, the ray beam sweeping a fiery arch toward the other. A sharp report thundered in the room bouncing in a dozen echoes and re-echoes from the metal walls. Smoke curled from the muzzle of the old automatic in Barry's fingers, and bitter acrid smell was in his nostrils. Long years in the dry atmosphere of the Crypt had brought no corrosion, no deterioration to the weapon!

Again Grey backed away, a curse ripping through his thin lips, suddenly clenched with pain. His right arm dangled uselessly, the ray gun dropping from nerveless fingers.

Barry Williams came to his feet, the searing pain in his right shoulder forgotten momentarily in his triumph. "Impervium was made to stop heat rays, Grey. But an old automatic waited here hundreds of years to bring justice to Mars!"

He turned to Deisanocta. Her face was radiant, but the grey depths of her lovely eyes clouded as they fixed on his seared shoulder. "Barry—"

"Never mind me," he ordered brusquely. "Get to that radio we brought. Tell your *men* to let loose the mist again and attack at once!"

Craig Grey's pain-twisted face went paler. "The mist! You can't—I destroyed—"

"That's what you were supposed to think, Grey," Barry snapped. "But you'll see that silver lining shining through the cloud you brought to Mars. Then we'll put the mist drug and Deisanocta's hypnotism to work on your rotten mind. We'll get enough details on your fraud to convince any government!"

"Now come on, get outside! Your men'll fall like sheep without leadership. I'll have the Princess speed things up by offer-

ing amnesty to those that surrender without resistance."

Craig Grey went slowly through the passage, down the ramp of the old spaceship.

TWELVE MILES above the surface of the red planet Mars, hovered the fleet of Earth transports. The Federal troops who'd made the trip from Earth were never to land. For Mars was a free planet, and Earth Government had commanded its forces to respect the sovereignty of Deisanocta, Queen of Mars.

From below, a steady stream of smaller ships was flowing up to the transports, and back downward for another load.

"Can't figure it out," said a puzzled soldier. "We came to fight Martians—maybe take some Martian prisoners; and we're going home loaded with Earthmen who are prisoners."

"There aren't any Martians," explained his irate Sergeant, "They're really Earthmen. And these prisoners have been treating them like Martians—or—or—"

"Never mind!" ordered his superior. "Anyway the ether between here and Earth's been burning. Faces—pictures of

documents, a confession, and all sorts of stuff have been radiographed to the old home planet. And we've got our orders."

The Sergeant was on firmer ground now. "Here comes the guy I wouldn't want to be—Craig Grey! After the stuff he's admitted, three times his money wouldn't keep him from the gas chambers!"

As the last of the Earth ships blasted homeward, Deisanocta, Queen of Mars, turned to Barry Williams, acting Terrestrial Ambassador. Affairs of Government weighed heavily on her, and Barry's training had been of invaluable help.

She fixed her tired eyes on him, and they glowed softly as she spoke. "And what will you do, Barry Williams, after the Permanent Ambassador has been appointed and sent here?"

His blue eyes met her gaze. "Read my mind, Deisanocta. This time my will is not opposed to it. The answer is there."

She came closer. "I will not use science to find that answer, Barry. It is in your eyes and on your lips, but you must speak."

"There are some things a woman, even a Queen, wants to learn only from the lips of the man she loves."

LESSON IN LOGISTICS:

Mrs. Brown learns why she must use less paper!

WHEN Mrs. Brown asked Grocer White why he didn't wrap her loaf of bread in the usual paper bag, he gave her a mighty quick and important answer. He told her how much our armed forces need every kind of paper to wrap the invasion ammunition, weapons, foods and medical supplies in. And Mrs. Brown, of course, was equally quick to see the importance of paper conservation not only at the store but in the home. Now she carries a market basket or shopping bag to save precious paper bags. Not a single piece of paper is wasted at the Brown home. Magazines like this, for instance, are passed along when read. Mrs. Brown is sure doing her duty. Are You?

All the magazines in America, added together, USE only 5% of the nation's paper supply. Yet, out of this comparatively small amount, they are SAVING 450 million pounds this year and **RELEASING** it for vital war needs.



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COSMIC YO-YO

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

"Want an asteroid in your back-yard? We supply 'em cheap. Trouble also handled without charge." Interplanetary Hauling Company. (ADVT.)

BOB PARKER, looking through the photo-amplifiers at the wedge-shaped asteroid, was plainly flabbergasted. Not in his wildest imaginings had he thought they would actually find what they were looking for.

"Cut the drive!" he yelled at Queazy. "I've got it, right on the nose. Queazy, my boy, can you imagine it? We're in the dough. Not only that, we're rich! Come here!"

Queazy discharged their tremendous inertia into the motive-tubes in such a manner that the big, powerful ship was moving at the same rate as the asteroid below—47.05 miles per second. He came slogging back excitedly, put his eyes to the eyepiece. He gasped, and his big body shook with joyful ejaculations.

"She checks down to the last dimension," Bob chortled, working with slide-rule and logarithm tables. "Now all we have to do is find out if she's made of tungsten, iron, quartz crystals, and cinnabar! But there couldn't be two asteroids of that shape anywhere else in the Belt, so this has to be it!"

He jerked a badly crumpled ethergram from his pocket, smoothed it out, and thumbed his nose at the signature.

"Whee! Mr. Andrew S. Burnside, you owe us five hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

Queazy straightened. A slow, likeable smile wreathed his tanned face. "Better take it easy," he advised, "until I land the ship and we use the atomic whirl spectro-scope to determine the composition of the asteroid."

"Have it your way," Bob Parker sang, happily. He threw the ethergram to the winds and it fell gently to the deck-plates.

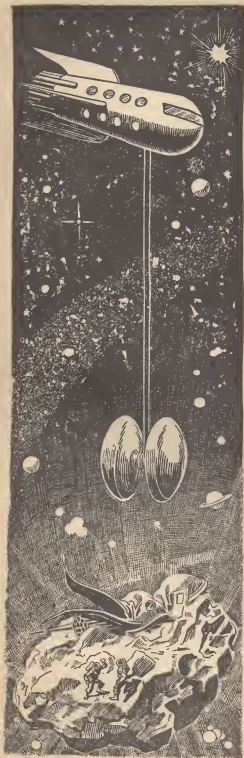


Illustration by DOOLIN

While Queazy—so called because his full name was Quentin Zuyler—dropped the ship straight down to the smooth surface of the asteroid, and clamped it tight with magnetic grapples, Bob flung open the lazarette, brought out two space-suits. Moments later, they were outside the ship, with star-powdered infinity spread to all sides.

In the ship, the ethergram from Andrew S. Burnside, of Philadelphia, one of the richest men in the world, still lay on the deck-plates. It was addressed to: Mr. Robert Parker, President Interplanetary Hauling & Moving Co., 777 Main Street, Satterfield City, Fontanaland, Mars. The ethergram read:

Received your advertising literature a week ago. Would like to state that yes I would like an asteroid in my back yard. Must meet following specifications: 506 feet length, long enough for wedding procession; 98 feet at base, tapering to 10 feet at apex; 9-12 feet thick; topside smooth-plane, underside rough-plane; composed of iron ore, tungsten, quartz crystals, and cinnabar. Must be in my back yard before 11:30 A.M. my time, for important wedding June 2, else order is void. Will pay \$5.00 per ton.

BOB PARKER had received that ethergram three weeks ago. And if The Interplanetary Hauling & Moving Co., hadn't been about to go on the rocks (chiefly due to the activities of Saylor & Saylor, a rival firm) neither Bob nor Queazy would have thought of sending an answering ethergram to Burnside stating that they would fill the order. It was, plainly, a hair-brained request. And yet, if by some chance there was such a rigidly specified asteroid, their financial worries would be over. That they had actually discovered the asteroid, using their mass-detectors in a weight-elimination process, seemed like an incredible stroke of luck. For there are literally millions of asteroids in the asteroid belt, and they had been out in space only three weeks.

The "asteroid in your back yard" idea had been Bob Parker's originally. Now it was a fad that was sweeping Earth, and Burnside wasn't the first rich man who had decided to hold a wedding on top of an asteroid. Unfortunately, other inter-

planetary moving companies had cashed in on that brainstorm, chiefly the firm of the Saylor brothers—which persons Bob Parker intended to punch in the nose some day. And would have before this if he hadn't been lanky and tall while they were giants. Now that he and Queazy had found the asteroid, they were desperate to get it to its destination, for fear that the Saylor brothers might get wind of what was going on, and try to beat them out of their profits. Which was not so far-fetched, because the firm of Saylor & Saylor made no pretense of being scrupulous.

Now they scuffed along the smooth-plane topside of the asteroid, the magnets in their shoes keeping them from stepping off into space. They came to the broad base of the asteroid-wedge, walked over the edge and "down" the twelve-foot thickness. Here they squatted, and Bob Parker happily clamped the atomic-whirl spectroscope to the rough surface. By the naked eye, they could see iron ore, quartz crystals, cinnabar, but he had the spectroscope and there was no reason why he shouldn't use it. He satisfied himself as to the exterior of the asteroid, and then sent the twin beams deep into its heart. The beams crossed, tore atoms from molecules, revolved them like an infinitely fine powder. The radiations from the sundered molecules traveled back up the beams to the atomic-whirl spectroscope. Bob watched a pointer which moved slowly up and up—past tungsten, past iridium, past gold—

Bob Parker said, in astonishment, "Hell! There's something screwy about this business. Look at that point—"

Neither he nor Queazy had the opportunity to observe the pointer any further. A cold, completely disagreeable feminine voice said,

"May I ask what you interlopers are doing on my asteroid?"

Bob started so badly that the spectroscope's settings were jarred and the lights in its interior died. Bob twisted his head around as far as he could inside the "aquarium"—the glass helmet, and found himself looking at a space-suited girl who was standing on the edge of the asteroid "below."

"Ma'am," said Bob, blinking, "did you say something?"

Queazy made a gulping sound and slowly

straightened. He automatically reached up as if he would take off his hat and twist it in his hands.

"I said," remarked the girl, "that you should scram off of my asteroid. And quit poking around at it with that spectroscope. I've already taken a reading. Cinnabar, iron ore, quartz crystals, tungsten. Goodbye."

BOB'S NOSE twitched as he adjusted his glasses, which he wore even inside his suit. He couldn't think of anything pertinent to say. He knew that he was slowly working up a blush. Mildly speaking, the girl was beautiful, and though only her carefully made-up face was visible—cool blue eyes, masterfully coiffed, upswept, glinting brown hair, wilful lips and chin—Bob suspected the rest of her compared nicely.

Her expression darkened as she saw the completely instinctive way he was looking at her and her radioed-voice rapped out, "Now you two boys go and play somewhere else! Else I'll let the Interplanetary Commission know you've infringed the law. G'bye!"

She turned and disappeared.

Bob awoke from his trance, shouted desperately, "Hey! Wait! *You!*"

He and Queazy caught up with her on the side of the asteroid they hadn't yet examined. It was a rough plane, completing the rigid qualifications Burnside had set down.

"Wait a minute," Bob Parker begged nervously. "I want to make some conversation, lady. I'm sure you don't understand the conditions—"

The girl turned and drew a gun from a holster. It was a spasticizer, and it was three times as big as her gloved hand.

"I understand conditions better than you do," she said. "You want to move this asteroid from its orbit and haul it back to Earth. Unfortunately, this is my home, by common law. Come back in a month. I don't expect to be here then."

"A month!" Parker burst the word out. He started to sweat, then his face became grim. He took two slow steps toward the girl. She blinked and lost her composure and unconsciously backed up two steps. About twenty steps away was her small dumbbell-shaped ship, so shiny and un-

scarred that it reflected starlight, in highlights from its curved surface. A rich girl's ship, Bob Parker thought angrily. A month would be too late!

He said grimly, "Don't worry. I don't intend to pull any rough stuff. I just want you to listen to reason. You've taken a whim to stay on an asteroid that doesn't mean anything to you one way or another. But to us—to me and Queazy here—it means our business. We got an order for this asteroid. Some screwball millionaire wants it for a backyard wedding see? We get five hundred and fifty thousand dollars for it! If we don't take this asteroid to Earth before June 2, we go back to Satterfield City and work the rest of our lives in the glass factories. Don't we, Queazy?"

Queazy said simply, "That's right, miss. We're in a spot. I assure you we didn't expect to find someone living here."

The girl holstered her spasticizer, but her completely inhospitable expression did not change. She put her hands on the bulging hips of her space-suit. "Okay," she said. "Now I understand the conditions. Now we both understand each other. G'bye again. I'm staying here and—" she smiled sweetly—"it may interest you to know that if I let you have the asteroid you'll save your business, but I'll meet a fate worse than death! So that's that."

Bob recognized finality when he saw it. "Come on, Queazy," he said fuming. "Let this brat have her way. But if I ever run across her without a space-suit on I'm going to give her the licking of her life, right where it'll do the most good!"

He turned angrily, but Queazy grabbed his arm, his mouth falling open. He pointed off into space, beyond the girl.

"What's that?" he whispered.

"What's wha—*Oh!*"

Bob Parker's stomach caved in. A few hundred feet away, floating gently toward the asteroid, came another ship—a ship a trifle bigger than their own. The girl turned, too. They heard her gasp. In another second, Bob was standing next to her. He turned the audio-switch to his headset off, and spoke to the girl by putting his helmet against hers.

"Listen to me, miss," he snapped earnestly, when she tried to draw away. "Don't talk by radio. That ship belongs to the

Saylor brothers! Oh, Lord, that this should happen! Somewhere along the line, we've been double-crossed. Those boys are after this asteroid too, and they won't hesitate to pull any rough stuff. We're in this together, understand? We got to back each other up."

The girl nodded dumbly. Suddenly she seemed to be frightened. "It's—it's very important that this—this asteroid stay right where it is," she said huskily. "What—what will they do?"

BOB PARKER didn't answer. The big ship had landed, and little blue sparks crackled between the hull and the asteroid as the magnetic clamps took hold. A few seconds later, the airlocks swung down, and five men let themselves down to the asteroid's surface and stood surveying the three who faced them.

The two men in the lead stood with their hands on their hips; their darkish, twin faces were grinning broadly.

"A pleasure," drawled Wally Saylor, looking at the girl. "What do you think of this situation Billy?"

"It's obvious," drawled Billy Saylor, rocking back and forth on his heels, "that Bob Parker and company have double-crossed us. We'll have to take steps."

The three men behind the Saylor twins broke into rough, chuckling laughter.

Bob Parker's gorge rose. "Scram," he said coldly. "We've got an ethergram direct from Andrew S. Burnside ordering this asteroid."

"So have we," Wally Saylor smiled—and his smile remained fixed, dangerous. He started moving forward, and the three men in back came abreast, forming a semi-circle which slowly closed in. Bob Parker gave back a step, as he saw their intentions.

"We got here first," he snapped harshly. "Try any funny stuff and we'll report you to the Interplanetary Commission!"

It was Bob Parker's misfortune that he didn't carry a weapon. Each of these men carried one or more, plainly visible. But he was thinking of the girl's spasticizer—a paralyzing weapon. He took a hair-brained chance, jerked the spasticizer from the girl's holster and yelled at Queazy. Queazy got the idea, urged his immense body into motion. He hurled straight at Billy Saylor, lifted him straight off the asteroid and

threw him away, into space. He yelled with triumph.

At the same time, the spasticizer Bob held was shot cleanly out of his hand by Wally Saylor. Bob roared, started toward Wally Saylor, knocked the smoking gun from his hand with a sweeping arm. Then something crushing seemed to hit him in the stomach, grabbing at his solar plexus. He doubled up, gurgling with agony. He fell over on his back, and his boots were wrenched loose from their magnetic grip. Vaguely, before the flickering points of light in his brain subsided to complete darkness, he heard the girl's scream of rage—then a scream of pain.

What had happened to Queazy he didn't know. He felt so horribly sick, he didn't care. Then—lights out.

BOB PARKER came to, the emptiness of remote starlight in his face. He opened his eyes. He was slowly revolving on an axis. Sometimes the Sun swept across his line of vision. A cold hammering began at the base of his skull, a sensation similar to that of being buried alive. There was no asteroid, no girl, no Queazy. He was alone in the vastness of space. Alone in a space-suit.

"Queazy!" he whispered. "Queazy! I'm running out of air!"

There was no answer from Queazy. With sick eyes, Bob studied the oxygen indicator. There was only five pounds pressure. Five pounds! That meant he had been floating around out here—how long? Days at least—maybe weeks! It was evident that somebody had given him a dose of spastic rays, enough to screw up every muscle in his body to the snapping point, putting him in such a condition of suspended animation that his oxygen needs were small. He closed his eyes, trying to fight against panic. He was glad he couldn't see any part of his body. He was probably scrawny. And he was hungry!

"I'll starve," he thought. "Or suffocate to death first!"

He couldn't keep himself from taking in great gulps of air. Minutes, then hours passed. He was breathing abnormally, and there wasn't enough air in the first place. He pleaded continually for Queazy, hoping that somehow Queazy could help, when probably Queazy was in the same condi-

tion. He ripped out wild curses directed at the Saylor brothers. Murderers, both of them! Up until this time, he had merely thought of them as business rivals. If he ever got out of this—

He groaned. He never would get out of it! After another hour, he was gasping weakly, and yellow spots danced in his eyes. He called Queazy's name once more, knowing that was the last time he would have strength to call it.

And this time the headset spoke back!

Bob Parker made a gurgling sound. A voice came again, washed with static, far away, burbling, but excited. Bob made a rattling sound in his throat. Then his eyes started to close, but he imagined that he saw a ship, shiny and small, driving toward him, growing in size against the backdrop of the Milky Way. He relapsed, a terrific buzzing in his ears.

He did not lose consciousness. He heard voices, Queazy's and the girl's, whoever she was. Somebody grabbed hold of his foot. His "aquarium" was unbuckled and good air washed over his streaming face. The sudden rush of oxygen to his brain dizzied him. Then he was lying on a bunk, and gradually the world beyond his sick body focussed in his clearing eyes and he knew he was alive—and going to stay that way, for awhile anyway.

"Thanks, Queazy," he said huskily.

Queazy was bending over him, his anxiety clearing away from his suddenly brightening face.

"Don't thank me," he whispered. "We'd have both been goners if it hadn't been for her. The Saylor brothers left her paralyzed like us, and when she woke up she was on a slow orbit around her ship. She unstrapped her holster and threw it away from her and it gave her enough reaction to reach the ship. She got inside and used the direction-finder on the teldaudio and located me first. The Saylor brothers scattered us far and wide." Queazy's broad, normally good-humored face twisted blackly. "The so and so's didn't care if we lived or died."

Bob saw the girl now, standing a little behind Queazy, looking down at him curiously, but unhappily. Her space-suit was off. She was wearing lightly striped blue slacks and blue silk blouse and she had a paper flower in her hair. Something in

Bob's stomach caved in as his eyes widened on her.

The girl said glumly, "I guess you men won't much care for me when you find out who I am and what I've done. I'm Starre Lowenthal—Andrew S. Burnside's granddaughter!"

BOB came slowly to his feet, and matched Queazy's slowly growing anger.

"Say that again?" he snapped. "This is some kind of dirty trick you and your grandfather cooked up?"

"No!" she exclaimed. "No. My grandfather didn't even know there was an asteroid like this. But I did, long before he ordered it from you—or from the Saylor brothers. You see—well, my granddad's about the stubbornest old hoot-owl in this universe! He's always had his way, and when people stand in his way, that's just a challenge to him. He's been badgering me for years to marry Mac, and so has Mac—"

"Who's Mac?" Queazy demanded.

"My fiancé, I guess," she said helplessly. "He's one of my granddad's protégés. Granddad's always financing some likely young man and giving him a start in life. Mac has become pretty famous for his Mercurian water-colors—he's an artist. Well, I couldn't hold out any longer. If you knew my grandfather, you'd know how absolutely *impossible* it is to go against him when he's got his mind set! I was just a mass of nerves. So I decided to trick him and I came out to the asteroid belt and picked out an asteroid that was shaped so a wedding could take place on it. I took the measurements and the composition, then I told my grandfather I'd marry Mac if the wedding was in the back yard on top of an asteroid with those measurements and made of iron ore, tungsten, and so forth. He agreed so fast he scared me, and just to make sure that if somebody *did* find the asteroid in time they wouldn't be able to get it back to Earth, I came out here and decided to live here. Asteroids up to a certain size belong to whoever happens to be on them, by common law. . . . So I had everything figured out—except," she added bitterly, "the Saylor brothers! I guess Granddad wanted to make sure the asteroid

was delivered, so he gave the order to several companies."

Bob swore under his breath. He went reeling across to a port, and was gratified to see his and Queazy's big interplanetary hauler floating only a few hundred feet away. He swung around, looked at Queazy.

"How long were we floating around out there?"

"Three weeks, according to the chronometer. The Saylor boys gave us a stiff shot."

"Ouch!" Bob groaned. Then he looked at Starre Lowenthal with determination.

"Miss, pardon me if say that this deal you and your granddad cooked up is plain screwy! With us on the butt end. But I'm going to put this to you plainly. We can catch up with the Saylor brothers even if they are three weeks ahead of us. The Saylor ship and ours both travel on the HH drive—inertia-less. But the asteroid has plenty of inertia, and so they'll have to haul it down to Earth by a long, spiraling orbit. We can go direct and probably catch up with them a few hundred thousand miles this side of Earth. And we can have a fling at getting the asteroid back!"

Her eyes sparkled. "You mean—" she cried. Then her attractive face fell. "Oh," she said. "Oh! And when you get it back, you'll land it."

"That's right," Bob said grimly. "We're in business. For us, it's a matter of survival. If the by-product of delivering the asteroid is your marriage—sorry! But until we do get the asteroid back, we three can work as a team if you're willing. We'll fight the other problem out later. Okay?"

She smiled tremulously. "Okay, I guess."

Queazy looked from one to another of them. He waved his hand scornfully at Bob. "You're plain nuts," he complained. "How do you propose to go about convincing the Saylor brothers they ought to let us have the asteroid back? Remember, commercial ships aren't allowed to carry long-range weapons. And we couldn't ram the Saylor brothers' ship—not without damaging our own ship just as much. Go ahead and answer that."

Bob looked at Queazy dismally. "The old balance-wheel," he groaned at Starre. "He's always pulling me up short when I go off half-cocked. All I know is, that maybe we'll get a good idea as we go along.

In the meantime, Starre—ahem—none of us has eaten in three weeks . . .?"

Starre got the idea. She smiled dazzlingly and vanished toward the galley.

BOB PARKER was in love with Starre Lowenthal. He knew that after five days out, as the ship hurled itself at breakneck speed toward Earth; probably that distracting emotion was the real reason he couldn't attach any significance to Starre's dumbbell-shaped ship, which trailed astern, attached by a long cable.

Starre apparently knew he was in love with her, too, for on the fifth day Bob was teaching her the mechanics of operating the hauler, and she gently lifted his hand from a finger-switch.

"Even I know that isn't the control to the Holloway vacuum-feeder, Bob. That switch is for the—ah—the anathern tube, you told me. Right?"

"Right," he said unsteadily. "Anyway, Starre, as I was saying, this ship operates according to the reverse Fitzgerald Contraction Formula. All moving bodies contract in the line of motion. What Holloway and Hammond did was to reverse that universal law. They caused the contraction first—motion had to follow! The gravitonic field affects every atom in the ship with the same speed at the same time. We could go from zero speed to our top speed of two thousand miles a second just like that!"

He snapped his fingers. "No acceleration effects. This type of ship, necessary in our business, can stop flat, back up, ease up, move in any direction, and the passengers wouldn't have any feeling of motion at— Oh, hell!" Bob groaned, the serious glory of her eyes making him shake. He took her hand. "Starre," he said desperately, "I've got to tell you something—"

She jerked her hand away. "No," she exclaimed in an almost frightened voice. "You can't tell me. There's—there's Mac," she finished, faltering. "The asteroid—"

"You *have* to marry him?"

Her eyes filled with tears. "I have to live up to the bargain."

"And ruin your whole life," he ground out. Suddenly, he turned back to the control board, quartered the vision plate. He pointed savagely to the lower left quarter, which gave a rearward view of the dumbbell ship trailing astern.

"There's your ship, Starre." He jabbed his finger at it. "I've got a feeling—and I can't put the thought into concrete words—that somehow the whole solution of the problem of grabbing the asteroid back lies there. But how? *How?*"

Starre's blue eyes followed the long cable back to where it was attached around her ship's narrow midsection.

She shook her head helplessly. "It just looks like a big yo-yo to me."

"A yo-yo?"

"Yes, a yo-yo. That's all." She was belligerent.

"A yo-yo!" Bob Parker yelled the word and almost hit the ceiling, he got out of the chair so fast. "Can you imagine it! A yo-yo!"

He disappeared from the room. "Queazy!" he shouted. "*Queazy, I've got it!*"

IT WAS Queazy who got into his space-suit and did the welding job, fastening two huge supra-steel "eyes" onto the dumbbell-shaped ship's narrow midsection. Into these eyes cables which trailed back to two winches in the big ship's nose were inserted, welded fast, and reinforced.

The nose of the hauler was blunt, perfectly fitted for the job. Bob Parker practiced and experimented for three hours with this yo-yo of cosmic dimensions, while Starre and Queazy stood over him bursting into strange, delighted squeals of laughter whenever the yo-yo reached the end of its double cable and started rolling back up to the ship. Queazy snapped his fingers.

"It'll work!" His gray eyes showed satisfaction. "Now, if only the Saylor brothers are where we calculated!"

They weren't where Bob and Queazy had calculated, as they had discovered the next day. They had expected to pick up the asteroid on their mass-detectors a few hundred thousand miles outside of the Moon's orbit. But now they saw the giant ship attached like a leech to the still bigger asteroid—inside the Moon's orbit! A mere two hundred thousand miles from Earth!

"We have to work fast," Bob stammered, sweating. He got within naked-eye distance of the Saylor brothers' ship. Below, Earth was spread out, a huge crescent shape, part of the Eastern hemisphere

vaguely visible through impeding clouds and atmosphere. The enemy ship was two miles distant, a black shadow occulting part of the brilliant sky. It was moving along a down-spiraling path toward Earth.

Queazy's big hand gripped his shoulder. "Go to it, Bob!"

Bob nodded grimly. He backed the hauler up about thirty miles, then sent it forward again, directly toward the Saylor brothers' ship at ten miles per second. And resting on the blunt nose of the ship was the "yo-yo."

There was little doubt the Saylor's saw their approach. But, scornfully, they made no attempt to evade. There was no possible harm the oncoming ship could wreak. Or at least that was what they thought, for Bob brought the hauler's speed down to zero—and Starre Lowenthal's little ship, possessing its own inertia, kept on moving!

It spun away from the hauler's blunt nose, paying out two rigid lengths of cable behind it as it unwound, hurled itself forward like a fantastic spinning cannon ball.

"It's going to hit!"

The excited cry came from Starre. But Bob swore. The dumbbell ship reached the end of its cables, falling a bare twenty feet short of completing its mission. It didn't stop spinning, but came winding back up the cable, at the same terrific speed with which it had left.

BOB SWEATED, having only fractions of seconds in which to maneuver for the "yo-yo" could strike a fatal blow at the hauler too. It was ticklish work completely to nullify the "yo-yo's" speed. Bob used exactly the same method of catching the "yo-yo" on the blunt nose of the ship as a baseball player uses to catch a hard-driven ball in his glove—namely, by matching the ball's speed and direction almost exactly at the moment of impact. And now Bob's hours of practice paid dividends, for the "yo-yo" came to rest snugly, ready to be released again.

All this had happened in such a short space of time that the Saylor brothers must have had only a bare realization of what was going on. But by the time the "yo-yo" was flung at them again, this time with better calculations, they managed to put the firmly held asteroid between them and

the deadly missile. But it was clumsy evasion, for the asteroid was several times as massive as the ship which was towing it, and its inertia was great. And as soon as the little ship came spinning back to rest, Bob flung the hauler to a new vantage point and again the "yo-yo" snapped out.

And this time—collision! Bob yelled as he saw the stern section of the Saylor brothers' ship crumple like tissue paper crushed between the hand. The dumbbell-shaped ship, smaller, and therefore stancher due to the principle of the arch, wound up again, wobbling a little. It had received a mere dent in its starboard half.

Starre was chortling with glee. Queazy whispered, "Attaboy, Bob! This time we'll knock 'em out of the sky!"

The "yo-yo" came to rest and at the same moment a gong rang excitedly. Bob knew what that meant. The Saylor brothers were trying to establish communication.

Queazy was across the room in two running strides. He threw in the telaudio and almost immediately, Wally Saylor's big body built up in the plate. Wally Saylor's face was quivering with wrath.

"What do you damned fools think you're trying to do?" he roared. "You've crushed in our stern section. You've sliced away half of our stern jets. Air is rushing out! You'll kill us!"

"Now," Bob drawled, "you're getting the idea."

"I'll inform the Interplanetary Commission!" screamed Saylor.

"If you're alive," Bob snarled wrathfully. "And you won't be unless you release the asteroid."

"I'll see you in Hades first!"

"Hades," remarked Bob coldly, "here you come!"

He snapped the hauler into its mile-a-second speed again, stopped it at zero. And the "yo-yo" went on its lone, destructive sortie.

For a fraction of a second Wally Saylor exhibited the countenance of a doomed man. In the telaudio plate, he whirled, and diminished in size with a strangled yell.

The "yo-yo" struck again, but Bob Parker maneuvered its speed in such a manner that it struck in the same place as before, but not as heavily, then rebounded and came spinning back with perfect, spar-

klings precision. And even before it snuggled itself into its berth, it was apparent that the Saylor brothers had given up. Like a wounded terrier, their ship shook itself free of the asteroid, hung in black space for a second, then vanished with a flaming puff of released gravitons from its still-intact jets.

The battle was won!

AS SOON as the hauler had grappled itself onto the prized asteroid, Bob Parker jumped to his feet with a grin on his face as wide as the void. Queazy grabbed his arm and pounded his shoulder. Bob shook him off, losing his elation.

"Cut it," he snapped. "It's too early for the glad-hand business. We've solved one problem, but we've run into another, as we knew we would."

He crossed determinedly to Starre, tipped up her downcast face.

"Starre," he said, "I guess you know I love you. If I asked you to marry me—"

She quivered. "Are you asking me, Bob?" she breathed.

"No! Couldn't ask you to marry me unless I had money. Starre, if it was up to me I'd drop the asteroid on the Moon, and you wouldn't have to take a chance on marrying a man you don't love. But I'm in partnership with Queazy and Queazy has his due—"

Queazy intervened, his grey eyes troubled. "No," he said quietly. "Hold on. I'll willingly forego any interest in the asteroid, Bob."

Bob laughed. "Nuts to you, Queazy! Don't get gallant. We'll be so deep in debt we'll never be independent again the rest of our lives if we don't land the asteroid. Thanks, anyway."

He took a deep breath. "Starre, you'll have to trust me. Today's the last of May. We've got two more days before we have to fill the order. In those two days, I think I can evolve a procedure to put all of us in the clear—with the exception of your fiancé and your grandfather. Which, I think, is as it should be, because these days people pick out their own husbands and wives. In other words, a few minutes before your wedding, the asteroid will be delivered—on schedule!"

"I'll trust you, Bob," Starre said huskily, after a moment of quiet. "But whatever

you've got in mind, to put one over on my grandfather, it better be good. . . ."

FOR A DAY and a half, ship and attached asteroid pursued a slow, unpowered orbit around Earth. For a day and a half, Bob Parker hardly slept. He gave Queazy charge of the ship entirely, had him send an ethergram to Andrew S. Burnside announcing that his asteroid would show up in time for the wedding, and that the bride would be there too.

Most of Bob's time was spent on the surface of the asteroid. He took spectroscopic readings from every possible angle, made endless notations on a pad. Sometimes, he worked in his cabin, and Queazy, ambling puzzledly into Bob's presence, could make nothing of the countless pages of calculation strewn about the room—figures which dealt with melting points, refractive indices, atmospheric velocities.

And finally, when Bob tore the ship and prisoned asteroid from their orbit, sent them into Earth's atmosphere, Queazy could make nothing of that either.

For Bob Parker apparently had a rigid schedule to follow in reference to the hour set for Starre's wedding. He hit the atmosphere at a certain second, at a certain speed. He followed a definite route through the atmosphere, slowly moving downward as he crossed the great Asiatic continents. He passed as slowly over the Atlantic, passed above New York City scarcely a dozen miles, and hovered over Philadelphia at last, a mile up.

Then he called Starre into the control room. She looked distracted, pale. She was wearing slacks and was as completely unprepared for her marriage as she could manage. Bob grinned, took her cold hand affectionately.

"We're over Philadelphia, Starre. You can point out the general section of the city of your granddad's home and estate for me. We'll be landing at 11:15 A.M. That's in about a half-hour. Whatever you do, make certain you aren't—ah—married before 12 o'clock. Okay?"

She extracted her hand from his, nodding dumbly. She sat down at the photo-amplifiers, and for the next fifteen minutes studied the streets below and guided him south. Then Bob dropped the ship until it was only a few hundred feet from the

ground. Around them pleasure craft circled, and on the streets and fields below people ran excitedly, pointing upward at the largest asteroid ever to be brought to the planet.

The ship labored over the fields with its tremendous burden, finally hovered over a clearing bordered by leafy oak and sycamore trees, part of Burnside's tremendous "back yard." There was a man with a red flag down there. Bob followed his directions, slowly brought the asteroid, rough side down, onto the carefully tended lawn. Then he lifted the hauler, placed it firmly on the opposite side of the clearing. Bob relaxed, wiped his sweating face, and felt a cool breeze as Queazy opened the air-lock.

Minutes later, Starre Lowenthal was the center of an excited, mystified group of wedding guests. Among them was her grandfather, a wrinkled, well-preserved old gentleman who alternately kissed her and flew into rages. Another man, handsome, blond, came rushing up, sweeping everybody out of his way. He took Starre in his arms, fervently. Bob Parker hated him at sight.

BURNSIDE cornered Starre and some sort of an argument ensued. Starre was insisting that she dress for the wedding, and finally her grandfather gave in. Starre flung a final, pleading look at Bob, and then disappeared toward the great white house with the Georgian pillars. Most of the guests trailed after her, and Burnside came stomping up to Bob. He thrust a slip of green paper into his hands.

"There's your check, young man!" he puffed. "Now you can get your greasy ship out of here. What do you mean by waiting until the last minute to bring the asteroid?"

Bob didn't answer. He said politely, "I'd like very much to stay for the wedding, sir."

The old man looked distastefully at his dirty coveralls. "You may," he said testily. "But please view it from a distance."

He started away, then suddenly turned back. "Would you mind telling me, young man, how it is that my granddaughter was in your ship?"

"I'll be glad to, sir," Bob said politely, "after the wedding. It's a long story."

"I've no doubt, I've no doubt," Burnside said, glaring. "But if it's anything scandalous, I don't want to hear it. This is an important wedding." He stomped away, limping.

Bob whirled toward Queazy, tensely, thrust the check into his hands. He jerked it back, hastily indorsed it and thrust it at Queazy again.

"Cash it! Quick! I'll meet you in the Somers Hotel."

Queazy asked no questions, but lifted the ship, and left.

At twenty minutes of twelve, somebody having rushed Starre into a hurried preparation for the wedding, the minister climbed a ladder to the apex of the asteroid, and the wedding march sounded out. Bob saw Starre, walking slowly on her grandfather's arm, her eyes looking straight ahead.

"Now!" Bob prayed. "Now!"

He groaned inwardly. It wasn't going to happen! He'd been a fool to think—

Then a yell, completely uninhibited, escaped his lips. The asteroid was quivering, precisely like gelatine dessert. Pieces of iron ore, tungsten, quartz and cinnabar began to fall from its sides. Little rivulets of a silvery-white liquid gushed outward in streams.

The wedding guests leapt to their feet with startled cries, starting running back toward higher ground. The wedding march ended in a clatter of discords. And Bob reached the asteroid as it went to pieces completely. He found himself ankle-deep in rivulets of liquid metal. He was swept off his feet, came up hanging onto a jagged boulder of floating iron ore. He looked around on a mad scene. Screams, yells, tangled legs.

"Bob!"

Starre's voice. Bob plunged toward her, yelling above the general tumult. For a radius of several hundred feet, there was a sluggishly moving liquid. People were floating on it, or standing in it ankle-deep, dumbfounded. Bob reached Starre, swept her up in his arms, went slushing off to the edge of the pool. Starre was laughing uncontrollably.

"There's a helicopter on the other side of the house," she cried. "We can get

away before they get organized."

THEY FOUND Queazy in a room at the Somers Hotel. He opened the door, and the worry on his face dissipated as he saw them. Behind him on a table were stacks of five-thousand-dollar bills. Before he could say anything, Starre demanded of him, "I couldn't get married on an asteroid if the asteroid wasn't there any more, could I, Queazy? One minute the asteroid was there and the next minute I was wading in a metal lake."

"Quicksilver," Bob Parker agreed happily. "The asteroid was almost entirely frozen mercury, except for an outer solid layer of iron ore, tungsten, quartz, cinnabar."

"I just took exterior readings," Starre explained, sheepishly.

"So I figured," continued Bob, "that if I took a lot of spectroscopic readings of the interior I could determine exactly how big a mass of frozen quicksilver there was. And how long it would take to thaw out once it was inside Earth's atmosphere!"

"That's the reason I had things scheduled to the dot, Queazy. I coaxed the asteroid along until the mercury was almost thawed out. When the wedding started, it melted all at once, being the same temperature all the way through. Satisfied?"

Queazy looked grave. As gravely, he moved back to the table, gestured to the money. "I hate to spoil your fun, Bob," he said slowly. "We'll have to give this back to Burnside. He didn't ask for quicksilver, you know."

"Didn't he?" Bob grinned smugly. "But he asked for cinnabar, didn't he? Wherever you find quicksilver you find cinnabar. Cinnabar is a source of quicksilver. And vice versa. Cinnabar is a sulphide of quicksilver! Nope, we earned that money, Queazy, my boy. It's ours legally. Hands off!"

He put Starre's shoe on her foot after emptying it of some more quicksilver. She stood up then, moved very close. "You can ask me now, can't you, Bob?" she whispered. She kissed him. "And if you do, that's my answer."

Which, of course, made the question totally unnecessary.

COMING OF THE GODS

By CHESTER WHITEHORN

Never had Mars seen such men as these, for they came from black space, carrying weird weapons—to fight for a race of which they had never heard.



Illustration by KIEMLE

RO MOVED cautiously. He knew the jungles of Mars well, knew the dangers, the swift death that could come to an unwary traveler. Many times

he had seen fellow Martians die by the razor fangs of Gin, the swamp snake. Their clear red skin had become blotched and purple, their eyeballs popped, their

faces swollen by the poison that raced through their veins. And Ro had seen the bones of luckless men vomited from the mouths of the Droo, the cannibal plants. And others there had been, some friends of his, who had become game for beasts of prey, or been swallowed by hungry, sucking pools of quicksand. No, the jungles of Mars were not to be taken casually, no matter how light in heart one was at the prospect of seeing home once more.

Ro was returning from the north. He had seen the great villages of thatched huts, the strange people who lived in these huts instead of in caves, and wore coverings on their feet and shining rings in their ears. And having quenched his curiosity about these people and their villages, he was satisfied to travel home again.

He was a man of the world now, weary of exploring and ready to settle down. He was anxious to see his family again, his father and mother and all his brothers and sisters; to sit round a fire with them at the entrance to their cave and tell of the wondrous places he'd visited. And, most of all, he wanted to see Na, graceful, dark eyed Na, whose fair face had disturbed his slumber so often, appearing in his dreams to call him home.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he reached the jungle's edge. Before him lay a broad expanse of plain. And far in the distance rose the great cliffs and the hills that were his home.

His handsome face broadened into a smile and he quickened his pace to a trot. There was no need for caution now. The dangers on the plain were few.

The sun beat down on his bare head and back. His red skin glistened. His thick black hair shone healthily.

Mile after mile fell behind him. His long, well muscled legs carried him swiftly toward the distant hills. His movements were graceful, easy, as the loping of Shee, the great cat.

Then, suddenly, he faltered in his stride. He stopped running and, shielding his eyes from the sun's glare, stared ahead. There was a figure running toward him. And behind that first figure, a second gave chase.

For a long moment Ro studied the approaching creatures. Then he gasped in surprise. The pursued was a young woman, a woman he knew. Na! The pur-

suer was a squat, ugly rat man, one of the vicious Oan who lived in the cliffs.

Ro exclaimed his surprise, then his rage. His handsome face was grim as he searched the ground with his eyes. When he found what he sought—a round rock that would fit his palm—he stooped, and snatching up the missile, he ran forward.

At great speed, he closed the gap between him and the approaching figures. He could see the rat man plainly now—his fanged, frothy mouth; furry face and twitching tail. The Oan, however, was too intent on his prey to notice Ro at first, and when he did, it was too late. For the young Martian had let fly with the round stone he carried.

The Oan squealed in terror and tried to swerve from his course. The fear of one who sees approaching death was in his movements and his cry. He had seen many Oan die because of the strength and accuracy in the red men's arms.

Despite his frantic contortions, the stone caught him in the side. His ribs and backbone cracked under the blow. He was dead before he struck the ground.

With hardly a glance at his fallen foe, Ro ran on to meet the girl. She fell into his arms and pressed her cheek to his bare shoulder. Her dark eyes were wet with gladness. Warm tears ran down Ro's arm.

FINALLY Na lifted her beautiful head. She looked timidly at Ro, her face a mask of respect. The young Martian tried to be stern in meeting her gaze, as was the custom among the men of his tribe when dealing with women; but he smiled instead.

"You're home," breathed Na.

"I have traveled far to the north," answered Ro simply, "and seen many things. And now I have returned for you."

"They must have been great things you saw," Na coaxed.

"Yes, great and many. But that tale can wait. Tell me first how you came to be playing tag with the Oan."

Na lowered her eyes.

"I was caught in the forest below the cliffs. The Oan spied me and I ran. The chase was long and tiring. I was almost ready to drop when you appeared."

"You were alone in the woods!" Ro exclaimed. "Since when do the women of our tribe travel from the cliffs alone?"

"Since a long time," she answered sadly. Then she cried. And between sobs she spoke:

"Many weeks ago a great noise came out of the sky. We ran to the mouths of our caves and looked out, and saw a great sphere of shining metal landing in the valley below. Many colored fire spat from one end of it.

"The men of our tribe snatched up stones, and holding one in their hands and one beneath their armpits, they climbed down to battle or greet our visitors. They had surrounded the sphere and were waiting, when suddenly an entrance appeared in the metal and two men stepped out.

"They were strange men indeed; white as the foam on water, and clothed in strange garb from the neck down, even to coverings on their feet. They made signs of peace—with one hand only, for they carried weapons of a sort in the other. And the men of our tribe made the same one-handed sign of peace, for they would not risk dropping their stones. Then the white men spoke; but their tongue was strange, and our men signaled that they could not understand. The white men smiled, and a great miracle took place. Suddenly to our minds came pictures and words. The white men spoke with their thoughts.

"They came from a place called Earth, they said. And they came in peace. Our men found they could think very hard and answer back with their own thoughts. And there was much talk and happiness, for friendly visitors were always welcome.

"There were two more white ones who came from the sphere. One was a woman with golden hair, and the other, a man of age, with hair like silver frost.

"There was a great feast then, and our men showed their skill at throwing. Then the white men displayed the power of their strange weapons by pointing them at a tree and causing flame to leap forth to burn the wood in two. We were indeed glad they came in peace.

"That night we asked them to sleep with us in the caves, but they made camp in the valley instead. The darkness passed swiftly and silently, and with the dawn we left our caves to rejoin our new friends. But everywhere a red man showed himself,

he cried out and died by the flame from the white men's weapons.

"I looked into the valley and saw hundreds of Oan. They had captured our friends in the night and were using their weapons to attack us. There was a one-sided battle that lasted three days. Finally, under cover of night, we were forced to leave the caves. One by one we went, and those of us who lived still travel alone."

Ro groaned aloud as Na finished her tale. His homecoming was a meeting with tragedy, instead of a joyful occasion.

"What of my father?" he asked hopefully. "He was a great warrior. Surely he didn't fall to the Oan?"

"He had no chance to fight," Na answered. "Two of your brothers died with him on that first morning."

RO SQUARED his shoulders and set his jaw. He wiped a hint of tears from his eyes.

"They shall pay," he murmured, and started off toward the cliffs again.

Na trailed behind him. Her face was grave with concern.

"They are very many," she said.

"Then there will be more to kill," answered Ro without turning.

"They have the weapons of the white ones."

"And the white ones, as well. They probably keep them alive to repair the weapons if they become useless. But when I have slain a few Oan, I will set the white ones free. They will help me to make more weapons. Together we will fight the rat men."

Na smiled. Ro was angry, but anger did not make him blind. He would make a good mate.

The sun was setting when the two Martians reached the cliffs. Below them was the valley in which lay the metal sphere. Ro could see it dimly outlined in the shadows, as Na had said. A distance away, in another clearing, he could see many Oan, flitting ghost-like from place to place.

There were no fires, for the Oan were more beast than man and feared flame; but Ro could make out four prone figures. They appeared to be white blots in the dimness. One had long, golden hair, like spun sunbeams; another's head was covered with

a thatch like a cap of snow on a mountain peak.

"You say they came from a place called Earth?" Ro asked Na in wonder.

"They traveled through space in their 'ship,'" Na answered. "They called themselves an expedition."

Ro was silent then. In a short time it would be dark enough to go down into the valley. When he had rescued the white ones, he would learn more about them.

He turned away from the valley to study Na. She was very beautiful. Her dark eyes seemed to sparkle and her hair shone in the twilight. He understood why she had crept into his dreams.

The darkness settled quickly. Soon Ro could barely make out the girl's features. It was time for him to leave.

He took a pouch from his waist and shook out a gold arm band. This he clasped on Na's wrist.

"All men will know now that you are the mate of Ro," he whispered. And he kissed her, as was the custom of his tribe when a man took a wife.

Without another word he disappeared over the edge of the cliff. They had already made plans for their next meeting. There was no need for a prolonged farewell. They would be together soon—on the far side of the cliff—if all went well.

In his left hand and under his armpit Ro carried stones. They were of a good weight and would make short work of any Oan who was foolish enough to cross his path.

His right arm he kept free for climbing. His fingers found crevices to hold to in the almost smooth wall. His toes seemed to have eyes to pierce the darkness in finding footholds.

THE CLIMB was long and dangerous. Ro's skin glistened with sweat. He had lived in the cliffs all his life, and had made many perilous climbs, but never one on so dark a night. It seemed an eternity before he rested at the bottom.

Feeling his way cautiously, he moved toward the camp. He could sense the presence of many Oan close by. The hair at the base of his neck prickled. He prayed he wouldn't be seen. An alarm now would spoil his plan.

Ahead of him, he saw a clearing. That

would be his destination. On the far side he would find the white ones. He took the stone from his armpit and moved on.

Suddenly he halted. A dim figure approached. It was one of the Oan, a guard. He was coming straight at Ro. The young Martian shrank back.

"The rat men have eyes to cut the night." It was a memory of his mother's voice. She had spoken those words when he was a child, to keep him from straying too far.

The Oan was only a few feet away now, but his eyes were not cutting the night. Ro could see his large ears, hear his twitching tail. In a moment the beast would stumble over him.

Like a phantom, Ro arose from his crouch. The rat man was startled, frozen with fear. Ro drove his right arm around. The stone in his hand cracked the Oan's skull like an eggshell. Ro caught the body as it fell, lowered it noiselessly to the ground.

Breathing more easily, Ro moved on. He reached the edge of the small clearing without making a sound. Strewn on the ground were shapeless heaps. They would be the slumbering rat men. Ro suppressed an urge to spring amongst them and slay them as they slept.

He lay flat on his stomach and inched his way ahead. It was slow work, but safer. When a sound reached his ears he drew himself together and feigned sleep. In the dusk he appeared no different than the others.

His chest was scratched in a thousand places when he reached the far side, but he felt no pain. His heart was singing within him. His job was almost simple now. The difficult part was done.

Straining his eyes, he caught sight of a golden mass some feet away. Crouching low, he darted toward it. In a moment his outstretched hands contacted a soft body. It seemed to shrink from his touch. A tiny gasp reached his ears.

"Be still," he thought. He remembered Na's words: *'We spoke with our thoughts.'* "Be still. I've come to free you." And then, because it seemed so futile, he whispered the words aloud.

Then his mind seemed to grow light, as though someone was sharing the weight of his brain. An urgent message to hurry—hurry reached him. It was as though he

was *feeling* words, words spoken in the light, sweet voice of a girl. Pictures that were not actually pictures entered his mind. Waves of thought that took no definite form held a plain meaning.

His groping hands found the girl's arm and moved down to the strips of hide that bound her wrists. He fumbled impatiently with the heavy knots.

"Don't move when you are free," he warned the girl as he worked. "I must release the others first. When all is ready I will give a signal with my thoughts and you will follow me."

Once again his mind grew light. The girl's thoughts assured him she would follow his instructions.

TIME passed quickly. To Ro, it seemed that his fingers were all thumbs. His breathing was heavy as he struggled with the knots. But finally the golden-haired girl was free.

Ro was more confident as he moved to untie the others. He worked more easily as each came free and he started on the next.

When they were ready, Ro signaled the four white people to follow him. They rose quietly and trailed him into the woods. The girl whispered something to one of the men. Ro turned and glared at her through the shadows.

The progress they made was slow, but gradually the distance between them and Oan camp grew. Ro increased his pace when silence was no longer necessary. The four white people stumbled ahead more quickly.

"We journey out of the valley and around the face of the cliffs," Ro told them. "After a short while, we will meet Na."

"Who is Na?" asked the girl.

"She is the one I have chosen for my mate," Ro answered.

The white girl was silent. They traveled quite a distance without communicating. Each was busy with his own thoughts.

Finally the man with the silver hair asked, "Why did you risk your life to rescue us?"

"With your help I will avenge the death of my father and brothers and the men of my tribe."

He stopped walking and stared around

him for a landmark. They had traveled far along the foot of the cliff. According to the plan Na should have met them minutes ago.

Then he gave a glad cry. Squinting ahead he saw an approaching figure. It was— His cry took on a note of alarm. The figure was bent low under the weight of a burden. It was a rat man, and slung across his shoulders was a girl.

Ro's body tensed and quivered. A low growl issued from deep in his throat. He charged forward.

The Oan saw him coming and straightened, allowing the girl to fall. He set his twisted legs and bared his fangs. The fur on his back stood out straight as he prepared to meet the young Martian's attack.

Ro struck his foe head on. They went down in a frenzied bundle of fury. The rat man's tail lashed out to twist around Ro's neck. With frantic strength, Ro tore it away before it could tighten.

Ignoring the Oan's slashing teeth, the young Martian pounded heavy fists into his soft stomach. Suddenly shifting his attack, Ro wrapped his legs around the rat man's waist. His hands caught a furry throat and tightened.

Over and over they rolled. The Oan clawed urgently at the Martian's choking fingers. His chest made strange noises as it pleaded for the air that would give it life. But Ro's hands were bands of steel, tightening, ever tightening their deadly grip.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, it was over. The rat man quivered and lay still.

Ro dismounted the limp body. His face wore a wildly triumphant expression. It changed as he remembered the girl. He ran to her side.

Na was just opening her eyes. She stared around her fearfully, then smiled as she recognized Ro. The young Martian breathed a sigh of relief.

Na turned her head and saw the body of the rat man. She shuddered.

"I was coming down the side of the mountain," she said. "I saw him standing at the foot. The shadows were deceiving. I thought it was you. It wasn't until too late that I discovered my mistake."

Ro gathered the girl in his arms. He spoke softly to her to help her forget.

WHEN she had recovered from her shock, the small group traveled on. Ro led them about a mile further along the base of the cliff, then up, to a cleverly concealed cave.

"We will stay here," he told the others, "until we are ready to attack the Oan."

"But there are only six of us," one of the white men protested. "There are hundreds of the beasts. We wouldn't have a chance."

Ro smiled.

"We will speak of that when it is dawn again," he said with his thoughts. "Now we must rest."

He sat in a corner of the cave and leaned back against the wall. His eyes were half shut and he pretended to doze. Actually he was studying the white ones.

The man with the silver hair seemed very old and weak, but very wise. The other men had hair as black as any Martian's, but their skin was pure white. They were handsome, Ro thought, in a barbaric sort of way. One was lean and determined, the other, equally determined, but stouter and less impressive. Ro then centered his attention on the girl. Her golden hair gleamed proudly, even in the dusk. She was very beautiful, almost as lovely as Na.

"Tell me," he asked suddenly, "where is this strange place you come from? And how is it that you can speak and cause others to speak with their minds?"

It was the old man who answered.

"We come from a place called Earth, many millions of miles away through space. My daughter, Charlotte, my two assistants, Carlson—" the lean man nodded—"Grimm—" the stouter man acknowledged the introduction—"and myself are an expedition. We came here to Mars to study."

Ro introduced himself and Na.

"What manner of a place is this Earth?" he asked, after the formalities.

"Our part of Earth, America, is a great country. Our cities are built of steel and stone, and we travel about in space boats. Now tell me, what is it like here on Mars? Surely the whole planet isn't wilderness. What year is it?"

"You have seen what it is like here," Ro answered. "As for 'year,' I don't understand."

"A year is a measure of time," the old

man explained. "When we left Earth it was the year twenty-two hundred."

"We have nothing like that here," said Ro, still puzzled. "But tell me, about this speaking with the mind. Perhaps I shall understand that."

"It's simple telepathy. We have mastered the science on Earth. It takes study from childhood, but once you have mastered the art, it is quite simple to transmit or receive thoughts from anyone. A mere matter of concentration. We—who speak different tongues—understand each other because of action we have in mind as we speak. We want the other to walk, we think of the other walking. A picture is transmitted and understood. It is a message in a Universal language."

Ro sighed.

"I am afraid we are very backward here on Mars," he said wearily. "I would like to learn more, but we must sleep now. Tomorrow will be a very busy day."

Ro slipped his arm about Na's shoulder and drew her closer. With their heads together they slept.

RO AWAKENED with the dawn. He was startled to find that Na had left his side. He rose quickly and strode to the mouth of the cave.

Na met him at the entrance. She was returning from a clump of trees a short distance away. Her arms were loaded with Manno, the fruit of Mars, and clusters of wild berries and grapes.

"You see," she said, "I will make you a good mate. Our table will be well provided for."

"You will make no mate at all," Ro said sternly, "and there will be no table if you wander off. Your next meeting with the Oan may not be so fortunate."

He glared at her for a moment, then smiled and helped her with her burden.

The others in the cave awakened. Ro noticed that Charlotte had slept beside Carlson, but moved away shyly now that it was daylight. He noticed, too, that Grimm was seeing the same thing and seemed annoyed.

Ro smiled. These young white men were no different than Martians where a girl was concerned.

When they had finished breakfast, they sat around the floor of the cave and spoke.

It was Carlson who asked, "How do you

expect the six of us to attack the rat men?"

"The Oan are cowards," Ro answered. "They are brave only because they have your weapons. But now that you are free, you can make more of these sticks that shoot fire."

Grimm laughed.

"It takes intricate machinery to construct a ray gun," he said. "Here in this wilderness we have sticks and stones to work with."

Ro sprang to his feet to tower above the man. His handsome face was twisted in anger.

"You're lying," he shouted aloud, forgetting that the white man couldn't understand his words. "You're lying because you are afraid. You refuse to help me avenge my people because you are more of a coward than the Oan."

Grimm climbed to his feet and backed away. Ro advanced on him, his fists clenched.

The old man also rose. He placed a restraining hand on Ro's arm.

"He's lying," said Ro with his thoughts.

"Tell him I'm speaking the truth, professor," said Grimm aloud.

The professor repeated Grimm's words with his thoughts. "It would be impossible to make new guns here," he said. "But there is another way. I have thought about it all night."

Ro turned quickly.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"The space sphere. There are weapons on our ship that are greater than ray guns. With those we could defeat the rat men." The professor shrugged, turned away. "But how could we get into the ship? It is too well guarded."

Ro fell silent. He walked to the mouth of the cave and stared out. When he turned back to the others, his attention was centered on Na.

"Perhaps the attraction you seem to hold for the Oan can be put to good use," he said aloud. "The sphere is a distance away from the Oan camp. All of the rat men cannot be guarding it. Perhaps, by revealing yourself, you can lure the guards away from their post."

He repeated his plan to the others.

"But they'll kill her," gasped Charlotte.

"She will be a woman alone," said Ro.

"The Oan prefer to capture women when they can."

"Then she'll be captured," the professor said. "It's much too risky."

Ro laughed.

"Do you think I will let her go alone? I will be close by. Na can lead the rat men through a narrow part of the valley. I will be above on the cliffs, waiting to pelt them with stones. Carlson or Grimm can be with me to roll an avalanche of rocks on their heads.

"In the meantime, you can take over the unguarded sphere. The rest will be easy."

The professor smacked his fist into his palm.

"It might work at that. Grimm can go with you. Carlson and Charlotte will go with me."

"Why me?" Grimm demanded. "Why not Carlson? Or are you saving him for your daughter?"

CARLSON grabbed Grimm by the shoulder and spun him around. He drove a hard fist into the stout man's face.

Grimm stumbled backward. He fell at the cave's entrance. His hand, sprawled behind him to stop his fall, closed over a rock. He flung it at Carlson from a sitting position. It caught Carlson in the shoulder.

Gritting his teeth, Carlson charged at Grimm. But Ro moved more swiftly. He caught the white man and forced him back.

"This is no time for fighting," he said. "When the Oan are defeated you can kill each other. But not until then."

Grimm brushed himself off as he got to his feet.

"Okay," he sneered. "I'll go with the red man. But when we meet again, it will be a different story."

Carlson turned to Ro.

"I'll go with you," he said. "Grimm can go with Charlotte and the professor."

When they had detailed their plan, the party left the cave. Ro led them into the thickest part of the forest and toward the Oan camp.

They moved swiftly. Before long they were at the narrow entrance to the valley. It was about a hundred yards long and twenty feet wide. The walls of the cliff rose almost straight up on both sides.

"We leave you here," said Ro to the professor. "Na will lead you to the sphere.

She will remain hidden until you have circled away from her. Then she will reveal herself."

Ro looked at Na for a long moment before they parted. He grew very proud of what he saw. There was no fear in her eyes. Her small chin was firm.

He turned to Carlson. The young Earthman was looking at Charlotte in much the same way.

"Come on," Ro said. "If we spend the rest of the morning here, the Oan will try some strategy of their own."

Carlson seemed to come out of a trance. He swung around to trail Ro up the sloping part of the mountain. They climbed in silence.

Once Ro stopped to look down into the valley. But Na and the others were gone. He felt a pang of regret as he turned to move upward.

When they had reached the top, he and Carlson set to work piling rocks and boulders at the edge of the cliff. They chose the point directly over the narrowest part of the valley. If all went well, the Oan would be trapped. They would die under a hailstorm of rock.

"You would have liked a more tender goodbye with Charlotte," Ro said to Carlson as they worked. "Was it fear of Grimm that prevented it?"

Carlson straightened. He weighed Ro's words before answering. Finally he said, "I didn't want to make trouble. It was a bad time, and senseless, besides. Charlotte and I are planning to be married when we return to America. It's not as though Grimm was still in the running. I'm sure he'll see reason when we tell him. It's foolish to be enemies."

"Why don't you take her for your wife here on Mars? That would end the trouble completely."

Carlson seemed surprised.

"It wouldn't be legal. Who would perform the ceremony?"

Ro seemed puzzled, then he laughed.

"Last night I thought that we on Mars are backward. Now I'm not so sure. When we find our mates here, we take her. There is no one to speak of 'legal' or 'ceremony.' After all, it's a personal matter. Who can tell us whether it is 'legal' or not? What better ceremony than a kiss and a promise?" He bent back to his work chuckling.

"I could argue the point," Carlson laughed. "I could tell you about a place called Hollywood. Marriage and divorce is bad enough there. Under your system, it would really be a mess. But I won't say anything. Here on Mars your kiss and a promise is probably as binding as any ceremony."

Ro didn't speak. He didn't concentrate and transmit his thoughts, but kept them to himself. The pictures he'd received from Carlson were confusing. The business at hand was more grim and important than untangling the puzzle.

THEY finished their work and seated themselves close to the edge of the cliff. Carlson was impatient. The inactivity rasped on his nerves. Ro stared anxiously at the spot where Na would make her appearance. The waiting was hard for him, too. Pictures of the girl stumbling and being caught in her chase with the rat men flashed through his mind. He flinched at what would happen then. It would cost, not only his own life, but the lives of those who had gone to the sphere.

Suddenly his fears were wiped away. Na appeared at the point he watched. She burst from the woods, running swiftly. A few seconds later, five rat men came into sight. One of them carried a ray gun.

The running figures looked tiny from the height of the cliff. They would make very poor targets. But a glance at the narrow point below reassured Ro. Even if the stones went wild, they would still land in that small area. There was no chance of their missing.

Na had entered the narrow strip. She seemed to be tiring. The rat men gained. Ro bit his lower lip and clutched the stones in his hands more tightly. Carlson crouched behind the larger rocks and boulders, ready to roll them over the ledge.

The rat men entered the pass.

Na had already passed below and was almost to the end, when she stumbled. Her head struck the hard ground as she pitched forward and she lay still.

Ro's heart leaped in his breast.

"Now!" he shouted, and let fly with one of his stones.

The missile left his hand with terrific speed. All the frantic strength in his arm was behind it. It flew straight to its mark.

The Oan carrying the ray gun dropped like a log.

Carlson shoved the heaviest boulders off the ledge. He worked furiously, moving from one to the next. They fell like a thunderclap on the rat men below.

But Ro had given the signal too late. Three of the Oan were crushed under the barrage. But one moved too swiftly. He passed under the falling stones unharmed and raced toward the fallen Na.

Ro drew back his arm. His pounding heart made it difficult to aim. The stone left his hand in a powerful sweep, but went wild.

The rat man was less than thirty feet from Na. When he reached her it would be too late.

Ro snatched up another stone. He forced himself to be calm as he took deliberate aim. He made the throw smoothly.

The stone sped from his hand. It streaked down on the racing Oan and found its mark in the small of his back. The rat man threw up his arms and collapsed a few feet from his goal.

Carlson pounded Ro's back jubilantly. The young Martian smiled at the Earthman's enthusiasm. Then, quieting the elation he felt, he grew serious.

"Perhaps our friends have not fared so well," he said with his thoughts. "If we find that they have succeeded, we will have real cause to celebrate."

Carlson sobered.

"If only they have succeeded," he said aloud. "I Charlotte—"

Ro couldn't understand the words, but Carlson's feelings were clear. He could understand that the Earthman would be anxious about Charlotte.

He placed his hand on Carlson's shoulder in a comradely gesture.

"I have a feeling that all is well," he said, wondering how true his thought would prove.

THE TWO MEN left the ledge and retraced their steps back to the valley. When they reached the foot of the cliff, Na was standing there waiting for them. Ro took her in his arms.

"My stumbling princess," he sighed. "I don't know how you would exist without me."

"I would fare very well," she answered,

feigning haughtiness. "I only get myself in trouble to let you enjoy being a hero."

A thought transmitted by Carlson interrupted their talk.

"We must hurry. They may need us. He had retrieved the ray gun the rat man had carried and was fingering the trigger impatiently. "They have only two of these now," he said, "but they will do plenty of damage."

They set off in the direction of the sphere. Ro carried a stone in either hand, ready for instant use.

Carlson urged them constantly to hurry. But Ro needed no urging. He led them at a fast pace through the forest. In a short while they could see the gleaming sides of the sphere.

Ro signaled a halt. He moved on alone, cautiously. His eyes strained ahead for a sign of the enemy, but all was still. Even at the edge of the clearing, he met silence.

Then the door to the sphere swung wide. Grimm stepped out, smiling widely. He waved a greeting.

Ro called to Na and Carlson and stepped into the clearing.

Grimm advanced a few steps, still smiling. Then his expression changed to one of fearful surprise. His eyes were fixed on a spot to Ro's right.

Ro followed his glance. He saw three rat men standing some thirty feet away.

They were half hidden by foliage, but Ro could see that one carried a ray gun. He was sighting along the barrel, aiming at Grimm.

Ro drew back the stone in his hand. He knew in that instant, his throw would be too late.

Grimm threw up his arms instinctively to ward off the burning death he expected.

But the rat man never fired. A lance of flame seared past Ro from behind him. The rat man holding the gun screamed in pain as the charge burned into his chest. He fell forward.

Ro released the rock in his hand, but it went wild. The remaining rat men fled.

Ro turned to find Carlson holding a smoking gun.

"Lucky I happened to pick this up back there," the Earthman said.

"Very lucky," said Ro. "For Grimm's sake."

"Into the sphere," Grimm called. "Those

other two will be bringing the whole tribe back."

Carlson retrieved the dead rat man's ray gun. Ro ushered Na across the clearing to the door of the sphere. Na hesitated a bit, then entered reluctantly. Ro followed, then Grimm and finally Carlson.

"I guess I owe my life to you," Grimm said, as Carlson closed the door. "And I owe you an apology for the way I acted this morning. I didn't understand how it was between you and Charlotte. She explained. It was quite a shock, but I guess I'll live. Apology accepted?"

He extended his hand.

Carlson took it sheepishly.

"Tell me," Ro interrupted, "did you meet any rat men when you took the sphere?"

Grimm shook his head.

"Those three just now are the first we've seen since we left you. When we got here the place was deserted. We—"

A cry from another section of the sphere made them turn. It was the professor's voice.

"Here they come," he shouted. "Hundreds of them."

CARLSON and Grimm dashed through a doorway in the direction of the cry. Ro followed, entering a spacious room. He was taken back by the intricate machinery he saw. There were countless numbers of dials and levers, gauges and indicators.

Carlson and Grimm took their places at tiny portholes. Ro found an unoccupied post and peered out. He saw a mass of grey bodies charging toward the sphere. There were more rat men than he'd ever seen at one time before. They seemed to be climbing over one another as they raced from the forest.

A sudden whirring of machinery within the sphere caused Ro to turn from the porthole. The three Earthmen were working levers and twisting dials frantically. Additional portholes appeared in the sides of the sphere. Long tubes rose on folding legs from the floor and slid through the openings.

"Take aim," the professor shouted in a commanding voice.

The whirring within the sphere grew louder. The floor seemed to quiver underfoot as giant motors generated energy.

"Fire!"

The entire sphere shuddered. Earthquaking explosions sounded outside as charges of force left the tubes to expel their power on the grey mass in the clearing.

Charge after charge was poured into the attacking rat men.

Ro leaped back to the porthole. He saw giant craters opening in the ground. Hoarse screams of pain and terror reached his ears. Scores of Oan were literally torn apart. Others disappeared completely. Those of the attackers who lived retreated in disorder. Ro noticed that one of the retreating Oan carried a ray gun.

"Cease fire," shouted the professor.

Carlson and Grimm turned from their guns laughing.

"They won't be back," chuckled Grimm. "They'll keep running for a week."

Ro moved silently to the post Carlson had occupied. He picked up the ray gun the Earthman had laid aside.

"What do you want with that?" asked the professor. "The battle is over. There won't be any use for ray guns now. We've beaten them."

"How does it work?" Ro asked grimly. His face was hard with determination.

The professor was puzzled, but explained the workings of the gun. He finished his explanation with, "But why?"

Ro walked to the door.

"The Oan still have a gun," he said. "When you are gone, they will return to use it on my people. That must not happen."

He said no more, but left the room. Na and the others heard the door of the sphere open and slam shut.

Carlson was the first to recover his wits.

"Come on," he said. "He may need help."

The three Earthmen armed themselves and left the ship. They saw Ro disappear into the wood and took after him.

Ro moved swiftly and silently. He slipped through the underbrush like an elusive phantom.

Some distance from the sphere he saw a grey shadow running ahead of him. He drew a bead on the creature and fired. A feeling of power surged through him as the rat man screamed and died.

He ran on.

Minutes passed before he saw the sec-

and Oan. The furry beast died a flaming death without uttering a sound.

Ahead of him, Ro saw a clearing. Instinctively he swerved from his course to circle it. He had gone halfway around, when his eyes caught sight of a twisted, grey body perched on a limb overlooking the clearing. It was the rat man he sought—the one with the ray gun, crouching there, waiting for Ro to step unsuspectingly into the clearing.

RO CHUCKLED as he caught the Oan in his sights. He pulled the trigger. Fire seared from the muzzle of the gun.

The rat man screamed wildly. He crashed down from the tree, leaving a trail of broken limbs in his wake. His body struck the ground with a dull thud, thrashed hopelessly for a few seconds, then lay still.

Ro laughed aloud and stepped into the clearing. He was still laughing when the three Earthmen came upon the scene.

"You should have seen the fool," Ro said. "Perched up there, waiting for me. What kind of a woodsman did he think I was?"

He stooped and lifted the Oan's gun. His face grew grave as he did so. When he came erect, he was covering the white men.

"Hold your weapons above your heads," he ordered.

The Earthmen obeyed, puzzled frowns clearing their faces.

"Now back to the sphere," Ro instructed.

Marching in single file they returned to the metal ship. Ro signaled them to halt then and called to Na. She came into the clearing and stood at his side.

"All right, into the sphere. All of you."

"But why?" the professor protested.

"What have we done? We're your friends."

"Do as I say," Ro shouted nervously. Then translated his words into the thoughts.

The professor obeyed, then Grimm. Carlson was the last to enter. Ro walked to the door behind him.

"Take these guns with you," he said, as the young Earthman entered the ship. "We will not need them here. My people will return to their homes now and all will be as it was."

"I understand," said Carlson. "There is no place for us here. We have brought nothing but trouble." He extended his hand. "I'm sorry."

Ro accepted the Earthman's gesture of friendship. He held the white hand in his firmly.

"You are a good friend," he said quietly. "Perhaps some day my people will grow up. Perhaps you will come again and we will meet you on equal terms. But now, our primitiveness, your science—there can be nothing but trouble. Make the others understand that. I will always remember you as friends. I wouldn't want our parting to be in anger."

"They will understand, Ro."

The Earthman closed the ship's door slowly.

Ro walked away from the sphere. He stood at the edge of the clearing, his arm about Na's shoulder, and watched the many colored fire spit from the rear of the ship. He and Na waved as the great mass of metal from another world left the ground. They waved until their white-skinned visitors had disappeared.

"Perhaps they will come again, when our people have grown up," Ro whispered sadly.

There was a hint of tears in his eyes.

**BUY WAR BONDS
AND KEEP THEM**



THE VIZIGRAPH

Dear thugs, creeps, goons, B.E.M.'s, Zwiiniks and Vizifans. There have been so many letters since the last PLANET STORIES came out, we had one heck of a time making our selections for this issue. Seems that gripes, praise, epithets and orchids are definitely not rationed; and, though our ears got cherry-red at times, we enjoyed (?) every one of the things. We only regret that more of them cannot see print this issue.

However, many of the oldtimers are represented, along with some of the new. We've had suggestions galore, which (as you will undoubtedly tell us) we shall blithely ignore, and putter along in our own fashion, putting together what we consider the best all around crop of futuristic stories in the business. We aren't snobs, for we like to buy from unknowns as well as professionals; and we've got a hunch you Vizifans like to see beginners take those first unsteady steps up the ladder of success, too.

But, shucks, your letters help those writers and artists a great deal. Why not write in, giving your opinions of the book? You dish it out, and we take it—and your fellow scribes vote for you to have or to not have one of the originals from PLANET STORIES for your den. You'll help us build this book even more—and perhaps win yourself an illustration.

How to write? What do we care! Be humorous, serious, pedantic, snarling, pleading—just so you double space on one side of paper only, with two page maximum, and typed missives preferred for easier editing. Keep in good taste, and we'll print your letters here for all the world to see—and rip apart.

So come on and write, for we'll be looking forward to your letters. This is your department, so kibitz to your heart's content.

Winning the Spring sweepstakes, taking originals from the Winter Issue are:

1. Loretta Beasley 2. Al Weinstein 3. Lewis Sherlock.

So long for now. Meanwhile, we'll let you in on—

OUR SECRET!

Eastaboga, Ala.

First, a thing or two to those who howl about the foolishness and such of the Viz writers . . . *that is the idea of the Viz!* The whole thing is a farce . . . sure, it's not always that, but no one can deny that, besides being a medium for the truly serious-minded and intelligent (my back to you, Buchanan! . . . I'll do as you say, ed. . . . no crack at Butch. Just an eloquent silence. Others have spoken, and truly . . .) to express themselves about the mag, it is a farcial, howlingly humorous place, where fans are invited to crack corny jokes, and wrestle with the editor, authors, artists, and other fans, the roughnecks!! Many don't get this facet of the jewel at all. Who's the funniest of them all? Why, that's plain!

Startlingly, or maybe it isn't, it's a guy named W. Scott Peacock who carries away the prizes for humor!

And he never gets originals!
Or does he...?

Oh, me. Now, a woid to those who scream against the sexy damsels on the covers. Sure, I tire of BEM's and Bums. But Beauties... never! Keep 'em there... why not have a cover showing a curvy dame all by herself, in a fragment or two of lace, against a black, starry background. Oh, for *Finlay*, *Rozen*, or one other whose name escapes me! And Demon Damon's sarcastic remarks on DePina's ideas of Ideal Disguises for Female Forms... ha, I'm laughing yet! Incidentally, Demon, you wouldn't have to be more explicit... sometimes a hint is more revealing than bare statement. Therein, by the way, lies the appeal in black lace over bared fl... well, maybe we'd better not go into that.

Glad to see that Skirvin is a reader of Thorne Smith. Once, to be devilish, I gave an aunt—maiden—a copy of "*Glorious Pool*." (Hehl Ed.)

No further comment is necessary... if you've read that book...

Also to Skirvin... no, I think just the opposite. Stf fans, authors, etc., would *not* be the most startled when brought into contact with a science-fiction transformed to real life... I'm sure I wouldn't be. We'd be used to it... it wouldn't reel our brains as much as it would the layman's, if I may use that term. What do you other guys say about the matter?

And because I'm running way over, I'll just answer Mrs. Currier's questions... which are in the nature of sticking her head out, and she is going to draw it back highly blushing. Or will she?

1. How does she keep the bra on...? Hmm. *Should she?* If you really want an answer, I think that's the tightness of the thing...

2. *Do they really make women that way... oh, sister!! Did you ask ME?* Pardon me... or should I conduct an investigation...

Peacock, if you cut this, I'll...

3. So she'll get caught with high heels on, eh? Give her high heels. That Bum needs *some* consolation...

4. What are filmy drapes for, because they hide nothing...?!!!! *That, my lady, is the idea.*...

No, the covers never agree with the stories. No, the Bum and the BEM are affronts to artwork, even when done well. They are useless, and out-moded.

But Take Not From Us Our Dames In Filmy Drapes, Tight Bras And Panties, Scanty Underwear, And The Like!!!

They're pleasant. Who's a prude? Not me. Not editor Peacock. Not the Vizifans.

And, praise Saint Patrick, Saint Michael, Saint Francis, and Saint Peter, *not* the artists either!!

Parkhurst is far better this issue than his unpleasant pic last time. Give us more by Gross, until Rozen is once again painting. Really, Roz is your best. More uncovered babes. Give originals to Damon the Demon (slender youth... tight-fighting garment, no less... "book with pictures"... Demon, you will kill me...") Bill Stoy, and Andy Anderson. Swell woid-slinging, Currier, Karpin, Skirvin. (So Perlac didn't look like the kind that could pass as a boy...? Get up there with Damon Knight!!). Trucano The Lecher, (?) and look who's talkin', Kennedy, and Conway, and welcome back!!!

Yours for three months, Damn it,

I wish it was only one!!

TOM PACE.

FRUSTRATION!

68Madbury rd
Durham, N. Hamp.

Dear Editor:

I had my foot in the door before the office boy could slam it. The door had "Editorial Office of Ye Planete Stories" in gold-leaf on it. With the 13 double E shoe wedged firmly in place, one could see into the room where men were busily at work. In desperation, the office boy pressed harder against the door. But in vain. The stranger walked in, and I threw my hat onto a hook, and walked more or less unobtrusively up to the desk. I cleared my throat. The editor looked up, laid down the blue pencil and asked civilly enough: "What can I do for you?"

"It's about this mag," I said, whipping out a current issue of PLANET.

"Oh... a fan... ah..."

I cut him short with, "Do you call this stuff fiction?"

"No STFiction," he replied roaring with laughter at the pun.

Before you could say "rejection-slip," I had pulled out my brief case. Pages of typed matter spilled out over the desk.

"Now here we have a little gem," I said. "It's an original plot about a hero and heroine going out after a band of monsters who make up a dope ring. She gets captured, naturally, but is rescued by the hero."

"What about the dope ring?"

Flicking a cigarette ash into his shirt pocket, I thumbed over to page 63. "Oh, I forgot to say that the professor's robot com..."

"Professor?" blankly.

"Oh yes... he's the heroine's father."

"What about the robot? Who's he?"

"Lessee... ah here it is. He helped Jack, that's the hero, to invent a fuel powerful enough to catch up to the villain's rocket ship, then I've got a novel ending for the story, the hero marries the heroine."

"That would be *too* different, we don't want the mag to seem radical," commented the ed drily.

"Now here's a brand new plot..." airily.

The editor reached for the button to call his henchmen. I stopped him in time. I waved my hands as if to clear the rejection-slip filled atmosphere with, "In this story I have brought up the idea that the red color of Mars can be attributed to the desert and that the canals bring water to the thirsty inhabitants. The first rocket-ship to Mars has the hero discovering that the ancient civilization is dying out. The Venusians, a new race, are trying to conquer the civilization. The hero gets an ancient ray-gun secret from the Martians and conquers the Venusians."

After an embarrassing silence, I lead with the brilliant theme, "the chief Venusian who was leading Venus into war turns out to be a robot controlled by a super-genius on Pluto... friend hero goes to Pluto and brings him to justice."

The ed once again reached below the desk and that is where I made my fatal mistake: where as I thought the ed was reaching for his check book, it was the burglar alarm. The men in the freshly laundered overcoats came and took me away.

Such is the thorny path of the true genius trying to break the prozines.

SinCYGNily,

BENSON PERRY.

STRIKE!!!

568 Audubon Ave.
New York 33, New York.

Dear Wiffle:

Thanks a lot for printing my letter, though Ghu knows it sounded awfully stupid after I read it again. Oh well, perhaps it won't be so bad this time.

The only thing I'll comment upon is the Ringer Family, which to me is growing rather stale. The rest of the issue appears to be uninteresting. That is, of course, besides that masterful letter column of yours. For all it's childish mouthings, it is, I suppose, about the most interesting and friendly column of its type. I think it's mostly —(if not all)—because of your swell editing. That is, picking out the letters so that you have an even distribution of both wretched and excellent letters. I heap praise upon you, Will, not because I consider myself able to do so, but because I enjoy La Viz a lot. May Ghu heap benediction upon your soul, if any. (Bless you. Ed.)

Kennedy did not come up to my expectations in the Feature Flash. He is usually more vivacious than he was. What's the matter, Joe? Having QX trouble?

Everett Marshall was good. By the way, do you know if he's a Futurian? Sounds very much like one. (He is. Ed.)

Hunter and Shawl were about the same. I found nothing of interest in either of them. On the other hand, Oliver was pretty good—in fact, at about his best. He soured his whole letter for me by that idiotic overworked adolescent 'Does your cigarette—etc.' If most of the readers would lay off that stuff (the young ones of course), the Viz would be better than it is now. I'm surprised you don't cut that nonsense out. Tom Pace also wrote a little like that. (This is the readers' column, remember. Good taste is criterion. Ed.)

Kinkade was fair. My eyes refused to work after a few moments of squinting at Dallas' letter. Why must they act like that? I think that is why Buchanan was so hot behind the collar. But I'll be damned if I or he won't admit that it brings a certain amount of pleasure to see one's letter printed in a nationally distributed magazine. I'm no psychologist but if there's one thing I know it's that that is just human nature. Hamel was almost entirely right. Everyone has a certain amount of conceit in him. (And so I finish the paragraph stroking the hair on my chin.)

I enjoyed Al Yeager very much. Very cute idea. I myself am an editor (amateur, of course), so I know something about the subject. Hmmm. Now for an ad. Send a dime to me and - - - but no. Why take up valuable space?

Roy Patzke seemed to be one of these "I love all the stories, all the pictures, all the people, all the world, and PLANET" guys. Now as you yourself admitted there are a few magazines—if only one or two—which are much better than PLANET is. It always gets my ire up when I look upon a letter from Mr. Lamb which states that he thinks PLANET is all wonderful (first of all, no magazine is that way) and never even read a decent story in his life. I pride myself inasmuch as I think I can tell the difference between a good story and a bad—I've had a little experience in writing. However, his writing seemed to more or less change

to a more matured tone near the end. So I really can't decide whether or not the letter was good.

Miss Lancaster's letter, I think, can be summarized as a thumbnail biography in twenty-five words or less. Sherlock's thing was very good. Mo' from him. And also Wyatt's letter.

I am indifferent as to F. J. Bethel's (the disgusted bystander) letter. I agree with him in some respects, and in some I don't. However, I don't think science fiction is worth all the trouble or bother to even criticize the stories. Science fiction is merely good as a pastime—to stimulate the imagination. No sf classic, no matter how great, can ever hope to compete with Shakespeare's work, or Kipling or a million others. However, fanning and reading do happen to be extremely interesting hobbies, and should remain as such.

Art Schnert's letter was extremely interesting and well written. I'm surprised that as many fans as do, write. 'Nother mystery of the universe, I'll warrant.

Ruby McDonald's letter was fair.

Sam Mason's letter was interesting. I think that planned fanzine of his was, or rather, is, a good idea. Heh. I don't think Ackerman will give a damn, confidentially.

Another so-called critique was Rose Jacobowitz. Foey.

Kessel overstepped himself. I would say that all "semi-readers" are far from moronic. A lot of them are simply childish. I admit I'm in many ways the same. There's nothing to be ashamed of. I'm quite sure that Buchanan and the rest went through the exact same stages that most young readers are going through now.

Hmmm. I didn't like the title for my letter. Harumph. I'm going on a strike. I want better headings.

Give Wilkie Conner my vote for first place. Very cute. Yas. Also cute was Bill Pullin's letter. ST Brown's letter said nothing at all. Beastly's letter was beastly. Not in the least funny.

Oh well. As the great bard said, "(oh hell. I can't think of what he said.)"

As drolly usual,

AL WEINSTEIN.

GIFT HINT!

406 West 6th Street,
Chico, California.

Dear Editor:

Pleasant indeed was the Spring '45 ish. of PS. I would say in all sincerity PLANET STORIES is increasing with savor every issue. The cover was superb which makes artist Parkhurst tops in my way of thinking.

Commenting on the stories, Leigh Brackett rates first with her super yarn *The Vanishing Venusians*. Let's have more, dear editor, of these type stories by this excellent authoress. *The Silver Plague* by De Pina was exceptionally well plotted. In the short stories I was impressed immensely by *Double Trouble* by Carl Jacobi. Please, let's have more short stories by him.

This about ends my comment this issue. In parting, I might say that a subscription to PS is about the swellest present a guy could give. Best wishes for continued success throughout the coming years.

I remain,
Sincerely,

J. CUNNINGHAM.

DANGEROUS DANIELS! BOO!!

DEAR DANIELS

2605 Westfield Ave.
Camden, New Jersey

To the Editor:

This letter is not from a fan, so do not expect praise.

I will confess to buying several issues of PLANET STORIES, but this only because of Leigh Brackett's superb fantasies.

You call PLANET STORIES a science fiction magazine yet I have never found any genuine science in your mag. But I have found blunders which were positively crude, per example:

I. *Lazarus Come Forth*—

- Strange that the effects of the void did not tear the body asunder.
- Whether or not there is a supposed ether pervading all space, when the sun's rays touched the body they would have burned it to a crisp.
- The sun's gravity would have pulled the corpse directly to it
If a planet like Jupiter having a mass (Earth = 1) of 316.94, almost 317 times that of Earth cannot escape the sun's gravity, how does "Lazarus" so "conveniently" do it?

II. *Chimera World*.

Don Denton, the hero, found "oxy-helmets" necessary for traversing Venusian terrain but it seems that his skin, often called the "second lung" needed no such protection. This stupid blunder is oft repeated on your covers.

I could go on like this endlessly but mentioning covers—

You too, must realize the poor quality of P.S. to find it necessary to resort to half nude girls on the cover in an effort to sell your magazines.

In the Spring issue a personage with the IQ of an idiot, B. Lambert dislikes "those little things de Pina sticks in front of the story. Too hard to understand" notice the use (?) of words? Mr. Lambert is half-nudes, blood and guts. The less science in a story the better they like it. They cannot digest stories which need thinking on the part of the reader . . . for example, Augustus Elliott Kinkade (what? no II or III?) being unable to comprehend the science in a mag edited by Ray A. Palmer, does what is to be expected of the ignorant; he "gets back" the only way he knows how, he "raps" that mag for proving to him his stupidity.

As for the Vizigraph one has to look far to find just one letter giving "constructive criticism" (which is what R. A. P. seeks in fan mail) instead one finds Deadly Denverites, Flying Freaks and Mad Professors all drooling for the honor of proving themselves "witless" as G. Dallas claims he is. I believe him!

I never intended writing such a letter as this, instead I preferred to ignore the mag's faults, but when A. E. Kinkade "calls down" a magazine which is a leader, if not the leader in the STF field . . . it's too much!!!

Said magazine edited by "RAP" is presenting a story which is a scoop, not only among STF mags but in scientific circles which may alter all our science concepts!!!

If you don't publish this letter I shall readily understand why.

C. RICHARD DANIELS.

This letter is not to a fan, so do not expect praise. Our blunders annoy us more than you. However . . . G. Richard, Earthmen are not deep-water critters; with but approximately fifteen pounds of pressure upon us, there is little possibility that we would be 'torn asunder' in space. As for being burned to a crisp, your 'science' is but a simple guess. The body would in all probability be pulled into the sun, sooner or later, but mass has little to do with it. Straighten Jupiter's flight away from the sun, and we're afraid Of Sol would be left far behind.

The 'stupid blunder' of the second lung needs no clarifying. Why, give any man enough oxygen and he could live in any atmosphere, regardless, which does not destroy flesh.

We think the 'thinking' crack uncalled for. For our money, after reading your letter, we have the opinion your scientific knowledge does not extend beyond your opinions. And as for the 'scoop' which may alter all of our scientific concepts—mail it in, we're the skeptical type.

And you look like a fair fellow, so we're making the following bet: We're betting ten books against a pack of Kools that you can find no claim in our book that we publish only scientific stories. Want to put up, or shut up? And while we're at it, let's have a look at your scientific background? Wanna play? Further yet—science does creep in—unnoticed. Dern it!

And we're sorry for our crudeness; sometimes we think we are in contact with too many people.

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

BIZNESS-GAL

1084 56th St.
Oakland 8, Calif.

Hello Editor:

If you have subscription for your magazine PLANET STORIES please let me know, as I want to subscribe. I've read S. F. for 6 years but didn't read the readers viewpoint in any magazine until this year. Also started to read PLANET STORIES which now I'm very sorry I didn't start long ago as there are still many back copies I need—but to get back to what I wanted to write is in your Vizigraph. I read that you give away copies of the drawing in PLANET STORIES to the best letters that the readers vote on, but what about all (including me) the readers that can't write anything interesting enough to get votes? Can't you put some up for sale so we "others" get a chance to have some drawing also? Writing for myself—I want some drawing very bad but being a very dull person—or lack of brain—would be ashamed to try for them with others that always seems to be in the Vizigraph.

I enjoy most stories in PLANET STORIES but most of the stories seems to me that, all the way through each one, lots and lots of writing has been cut from them—how about that, are the stories only half there? because the same or some of them (the authors in other S. F. magazines seem to be complete even so your magazine is pretty good you see. I like stories that are not so much "Other Worlds" stuff—but stories in the past. Hoping you can sell some drawing to me, I remain,

MISS LILLIAN SCHNEIDER.

CHEAPENED PLANET!

130 W. 183rd St.
Bronx 53, New York

Dear Editor:

Since I liked the Spring, 1945 issue, I shall now comment on same.

To begin from the beginning, the cover was better than average. I won't say it was excellent (it wasn't), but it seemed, to my color-dazzled eyes, considerably more subdued than usual. The colors were not actually clashing, the artifacts—I hope I'm using this correctly; I think I am—were interesting, and the anatomy was not particularly inaccurate. In fact, I think Parkhurst is improving.

Now for the stories.

The Sandhound Strikes was good, but I'm skeptical about the Sandhound's superhuman abilities—even Sidney Hallmyer's guilty conscience is preferable. And Ross Rocklynne is capable of much better work than this.

The Vanishing Venusians was in Leigh Brackett's best style—excellent. Beautiful, eerie, haunting writing. I have only one small criticism: who or what are the "Cloud People"? My guess is that they are unearthly invaders of Earth; am I right? (You're wrong, Ed.)

* *The Silver Plague* was more interesting and less verbose than some of Albert De Pina's recent work, but the horrible picture of warring governments is too painfully real to be easily forgotten. But it was an excellent story.

Robert Wilson's *Vandals of the Void* had a plot that was entirely new to me. Wilson's style is not particularly distinguished, but he tells a good story. However, I'm afraid I spotted Dr. Theller as a traitor near the beginning—my detective-story training, no doubt.

The Happy Castaway, I am unhappy to say, either was remarkably full of nothing much, or else had been cut without regard for story. I was hopelessly confused, and rereading didn't help. I think if the author had had a plot to begin with, the final result would have been better, regardless of treatment.

Double Trouble was confusing, too, but it was comically confusing—quite a difference: I think Carl Jacobi's writing has undergone a great change for the better since *Cosmic Castaway* of fragrant memory. In fact, I think "Grannie Annie" will go on and on.

Death Star is a pleasant reminder of PLANET STORIES' earliest issues—a preponderance of action, with a minimum of intelligence (on the part of the hero, of course) and a neat solution. Congratulations to the author, who is, I understand, a fan-turned-author.

Joe Carson's Weapon was puzzling. I couldn't decide whether it was meant as humor, as adventure, or as irony. I finally concluded that it was a mixture of all of them. And that letter—it looked very like those which have appeared in PS since it began.

There were no really bad illustrations in the issue, although Krank's for *The Vanishing Venusians* came closest to that rating.

I do not like the small portraits interspersed through some of the stories; I think it cheapens the magazine (in quality, not price). If you must fill up space, why not use the same method you used at the end of *The Vanishing Venusians*? Of course, this is only the opinion of one critical but well-intentioned reader.

The Vizigraph was interesting; it always is. My choices are:

First, Virginia L. Shawl. Not that there was very much to the letter—it was certainly frothy. But I do agree with her about the off-trail novel, and I am very glad to see it back.

Second, Loretta Adele Beasley. She brought up a lot of questions that some science fiction author could use with humorous effect in a story, and I liked her letter; it wasn't too hard on the eyes in the matter of punctuation, and it was not a mere series of disconnected thoughts.

Third, G. Dallas, but only for the criticisms and the original plot (which reminds me of Ray Cummings).

Incidentally, what has happened to Ray Cummings, Nelson S. Bond and E(and)O Binder? I miss their stories in P.S. (So do we, Ed.)

There are a lot of other suggestions I could make, but I think these are the most important. After the war, make P.S. a monthly magazine (if possible) and make it larger. I believe that I'm not your only reader who wants this.

I'd like to know if it's still possible to get Volume I, Number 4. I do have a copy at present, but some miscreant had cut out *The Ultimate Salient* before I got it. (Sorry, sold out. Ed.)

I am looking forward to the next issue.

Sincerely,

ROSE JACOBOWITZ.

Indianapolis, Indiana

THE DIRTY RETCH!

(With apologies to Don Marquis and archie)

peacock and i got to talking and i
said well wilbur
i see where the spring planet
hit the stands today
what do you mean hit
he says planet comes out with a
crash of cymbals and blare of
horns its more like a clash of
colors and glare of fans
i said well we do all right
so who are you to talk so big he
sneered and i said something nice
about joe carsons weapon which
put him in a good mood again
what about vandals of the void he
said slyly and laughed as my
lips trembled and i
grew green we know what the fans want
and we give it to them he
cried fiercely i saw waves
of blood beating against a high cliff
of pearl white bodies wrapped
in thin silk the air was thin and
filled with flames little green men
with eight tendrils whooped and hollered
as they clutched at the pearl white bodies
wilbur stuck his mad eyes in front of mine
and gibbered the
sandhound strikes the
vanishing venusians with the
silver plague while the
happy castaway finds
himself in double trouble on the
death star and i fainted dead away
when i came to it was night and the
cool breezes revived me somewhat but
across the road i could hear wild sounds
of battle which could mean only one thing
people were still fighting for planet -
so i retched and stumbled away

Ah well . . .

RENE DUBOIS.

OUR ADDRESS

2307 10th St.
Columbus, Ga.

Dear Editor:

Please put the address that you are supposed to send letters to PLANET STORIES in your column. I wrote a letter about the winter P.S., sent off. A few days later I got it back with "no such address" written on it. I sent it off again, this time putting no return address on the envelope. The post-office, however, is a very persistent branch. They opened the letter, which had my address in it, and again I got my masterpiece back. This time I had to pay a nickel to get it back, not that I wanted it. So again I say tell us what the address is. (670 Fifth Ave. Ed.)

Now for the Spring issue.

The cover resembled the Winter one a lot in color scheme. Also they were neither . . . er . . . shall we say very good. The latest was best tho.

The inside pics were pretty good, especially the one for *Silver Plague*. The best pic was the one on the contents page. Who drew that? (Doolin. Ed.)

Many of your letters say that others don't care what their opinion on the stories is, but I for one do. So I'll rate the stories.

Vanishing Venusians—1. Brackett returns after a two issue (too long) absence. *Joe Carson's Weapon*—2. New plot. The fan letter was a masterpiece. The picture gave me a very wrong idea of the story. Is Paul forgetting how to read too? *Vandals of the Void*—3. *Death Star*—4. This short had a lotta action for a short. I like action. Congratulations Tom Pace. *The Sandhound Strikes*—5. Better than the other Sandhound stories. *Double Trouble* and *Happy Castaway* tie for sixth place. It's getting to be a habit with me to rate Depina last place. But *Silver Plague* was pretty good tho. The trouble is, I don't know what half the words mean. Mr. DePina must have a wonderful vocabulary. Not a bad story in the issue. Can't DePina and Hasse get back together.

Best story in the Winter number (in my obnoxious opinion) was *Lazarus Come Forth*.

I like Sam Mason's idea.

I wish I was funny today. Usually I'm very moronic. Guess I'm sad because I lost a football bet yesterday. A whole nickel. By the way G. Dallas' letter was extremely amusing. Also Oliver and Rozen. Is he any kin to The artist.

If Joe Carson's letter went in the wastebasket, I sure pity this one. (It is a pity, isn't it! Ed.)

Sincerely,

MILLARD GRIMES,
The Brainless Wonder.

TERRIO AIN'T MAD?

94 Lincoln Street,
Brighton, 35, Mass.

Dear Editor:

I didn't intend to write for a long time, but the lure of PLANET was too strong. Could it be that Ye Ed. is a telepath? Possible.

Cover artist Parkhurst has a rather distinctive style. (I didn't say it was good.) I puzzled over his cover for a long time, and finally concluded that it represented the Brackett-tale. The cover itself was rather "repetitious," if you know what I mean. It looked exactly like the Fall '44 one. (Trapped, Egad, in our Foul Plot! Ed.)

The inside pix were all putrid, except for two. Doolin's on 84 & 85 was mediocre. As I turned to Adam's tale, Paul's beauty hit me like a ton of bricks. Where had I seen it before? Ah! *Vassals of the Master-World*, by Binder. But I'm not kicking. I only wish that you gave us all of it, instead of cutting it in half.

And now, the stories. Some good, some bad. In the order of their merit:

1. *Vandals of The Void*, by Robert Wilson.

2. *The Sandhound Strikes*, by Ross Rocklynne. One of my favorite authors, back at last. More of the Sandhound, or another Hallmeyer yarn. Maybe you could even get him to pound out a story on his "*Into The Darkness*" theme.

3. *The Vanishing Venusians*, by Leigh Brackett.

4. *The Silver Plague*, by Albert De Pina.

5. *Joe Carson's Weapon*, by James R. Adams. A delightful little satire. More! The rest also ran.

The three best letters are Oliver, Kinkade, and Connor, in any order you prefer. The Viz has degenerated. Where are Lesser, Stoy, Asimov, Washington, Jr., and all the other fellows who used to write so often and so well? Please, inject a little life into the Viz or I'll do something fiendish. (Go ahead, we dare ya: Ed.)

Where is Nelson Bond? He left himself wide open for a sequel to *Phantom out of Time*. I am in favor of your policy of introducing new authors, but limit the new names to one per issue, and try to develop them. Don't clutter up the cover with unnecessary lettering. How about a novel by Editor Peacock? Glad to see Gifford back after his two issue absence. Let's have one of his cartoons in each and every issue henceforth. That's just about all, except that I am no longer the Mad Astronomer, since I just busted my telescope.

Sincerely,

BILL TERRIO.

JOE FANN!

Box 247,
Hartshorne, Oklahoma.

Dear Ed:

I had about decided that writing letters to editors was an adolescent phenomena, a thing I'd outgrown. And then I read *Joe Carson's Weapon* in the Spring Issue of PLANET STORIES. I got more kick out of this story than anything else in the magazine, in spite of the fact that Brackett and DePina both came through with tales that rank up there with the best ever written. The irony, sarcasm, wit—call it what you will—of Adam's short is cruel and biting, yet so absolutely true it's funny. Take that letter of Joe's to the editor of "*Galactic Adventures*"—you could have published it in the Vizigraph, word for word, and the only reaction from your readers would have been wonder at the unfamiliar names of authors, artists and stories. If you'd changed the names a little, putting "PLANET STORIES" in place of "*Galactic Adventures*" etc., the letter would have been just another typical fan letter.

Published by itself in a story the way it was, however, that letter of Joe's was pitiful and infinitely cruel—and sidesplittingly funny.

In case you haven't already guessed, I'll confess something—"Joe Carson" is "Joe Fann," which is another name for,

Yours truly,

JAMES R. GRAY.

INNOCENTLY?

48 Mill Rd.,
Durham, N. H.

Dear Wilbur,

"Innocently walking down street . . ."
"Blaze of color on local newsstand . . ."
"Fight way thru mob . . ."
"Rush home thru back alleys . . ."
"I'm back."

Upon getting my PS, my first move was naturally to turn to the Vizigraph. What did I find. What? No sooner did you "tire" of our discussions of Mr. Buchanan than you ring in this new character, Bethel. For Bethel, \$*%*&?!!

Now for the stories. The only outstanding one was *Joe Carson's Weapon*. It was actually FUNNY.

The Vanishing Venusians was the usual Brackett hack. She has a wonderful style if she would only pick a good subject. In spite of all the action, I get the impression, when I'm done, that nothing has happened in a lot of words.

The Sandhound Strikes was pretty good. Better than the last Sandhound yarn.

The Happy Castaway was a good handling of a poor idea. It ended rather abruptly, tho.

The Silver Plague was an excellent plot very well handled. I had the feeling that I shouldn't have liked it. But I did.

"Feature Flash." It's high time that you got around to JoKe, *Double Trouble*. This WASN'T FUNNY. *Death Star*. Average, average, average, average. Discouraging! Last and not quite least *Vandals of the Void*. Better than average, in fact I might even say good, in fact I will say good, "good."

The Viz was worse than usual. You printed my letter. . . . First place goes to Walt Kessel. Ditto everything he said. Second and third go to Hamel and Dallas (or is it Dalas?).

Cover: get rid of this Parkhurst guy. Either that or get him to draw a different picture. The same one gets a little boring after a while. Especially, to illustrate different stories.

The inside illo's are better than usual. I'm glad to see the Ringer Family back again.

Aren't there any fans in New Hampshire but Perry and I???

Hopefully,

A. YEAGER, Jr.

FERTILIZER?

Coronado, Calif.

Greetings, Peacock,

Being a sensitive person, I've not sent you a little epistle in all these years of reading the PLANET. Now I am aroused from my lethargy, and send this flash across space (dit dit dah), that's Martian secret code, and censorship by the high Llama forbids translation. Having deciphered Spring is of above named, have the following comments. Please put on this plasto-glas thought helmet, and I'll transmit waves of knowledge through that inferior brain of yours.

Lying on my transparent blanket of woven synthawool, I turned on the automatic reader, and up popped *The Sandhound Strikes*, total on the scoreboard beside it was flashed, and read, fair, but not as good as usual Sandhound episodes.

Brackett's made the electric stylus frantically run up and down, and nearly blew a fuse, looking for a rating high enough. Let's have more of her novelettes of that caliber.

The Happy Castaway was read by the entire Martian populace, and is on a must list for our growing children, who are being taught the rudiments of Primitive humor, however I did blush, along with Fawkes at the Amazon dinner table.

The other stories caused a faint glimmer of greenish hue, and the total for the magazine, after forming into a solid compound, rolled out of the materialization chute as three peaches, two lemons, and the rest blow-fish.

As we waste nothing on this superior planet, I ate the peaches, had lemonade for two days, and used the fish for fertilizer. In hopes of receiving more of your PLANET STORIES via my ethergram,

I remain,

BEVERLY FICKAS,
The Termagante.

FRASNICKLY?

123456 E. Northsouth Ave.
Cleveland, Ohio

Dear Ed:

As my good friend would ask: "Do you mean to state that you decline to inform us of the nefarious deeds perpetrated against society by you and your associates?" to quote my good friend, Korb-3j78FG634c8z. (All this nutty stuff has no bearing whatsoever on the following letter, but it is one good way to attract attention to it!)

Glancing into my Trans-atomic Projector the other day, I noticed a copy of Spring PLANET STORIES, a puzzled, fuming, news dealer beside it. Dropping him thru a trap-door into a Disintegration Chamber, I concentrated on the mag and proceeded to mentalize it (read it with thoughtwaves).

Thermustically, as my good friend Korb-3j78FG634c8z would say. This Korb-3j78etc. happens to be one of my most successful synthetic mutant experiments on the Non-tryggilite species of the Arcturian robot planet, Figititis IV. Korb can talk, think, eat, sleep, and read PLANET STORIES regularly.

Anyhow, the stories in the Spring issue are rated as follows:

Happy Castaway—1 star system
Joe's Weapon—1 star system
Vanishing Venusians—3 major planets
Sandhound Strikes—2 major planets
Double Trouble—3 minor planets
Death Star—2 moons
Silver Plague—1 lousy asteroid

The cover: I'm afraid that if Mr. Parkhurst doesn't improve or illustrate a story soon, the news dealer above shall have some company.

Included in the letter are a couple of pencil drawings. I'm wondering if I have a chance to be an illustrator. All my friends say I could (those that didn't aren't my friends any more). I'd like to be an illustrator, Mr. Peacock will it. I promise to illustrate a story accurately, too. If Gifford can do it, so can I!!! etc.

Caterectiphalchy, as my good friend Korb-you-know-who would say, it is about time I closed. Until I creep again, I remain yours kipliely,

M. T. HEADED,
Stih'thick Y'nyarm.

SOON UPON A TIME!

Carsonville, Mich.

I spent the evening alone and had just finished reading my new Winter PLANET mag all at one sitting.

I found myself alone in the void. Don't know how I got there—just shut my eyes and there I was. Then I began walking over a very muddy, flat surface. The sky was gray (yep it popped up), the mud was gray and I was blue. The mud clung to my feet and the going was tough, but I kept on and on. Finally I came to a place where the mud was pushed up in mounds with a hole in the center of each. They looked like a pile of huge donuts,

Then scurrying among the mounds I saw such queer creatures. They had small heads with large noses and ears, very long necks, two long slim arms with three fingers and two thumbs on each hand. Their bodies were bent forward like a kangaroo and ended with a short tail. Their legs, thighs, and feet resembled a frog. They were each tossing a mud ball from hand to hand.

Standing near a mud mound I saw a very, very beautiful girl dressed in a couple of breast plates and a short kilt. Do I, or do I not, read s.f. mags?

I think the queer creatures—Oh, by the way, they were Chubadees—lived down in the earth in some kind of cavern. The mounds were their doors.

I saw a fine specimen of super man with one of those handy ray-guns, skulking around. I suppose he was there to rescue the fair damsel.

The Chubadees started throwing their mud balls at the boy and girl, and as the balls left their hands they burst into millions and millions of tiny sparks. The man, or I guess he was a boy, turned his ray-gun on the sparks and they revolved round and round until they became a huge silver sphere with a door in the side. The boy opened the door and helped the girl into the sphere, then got in himself as it slowly rose high above the Chubadees.

Ho, Hum, where am I? I must have arrived at the very end of the story.

What I started out to do was to tell you how very much I like your magazine.

It is so new to me that I have not as yet any favorite authors or artists.

The stories are interesting, but far-fetched. All you have to do is get on some distant planet, and let your mind run riot.

I am not one of your youthful readers. I am a grandmother of fifty-five, and fed up with ordinary occurrences, so your magazine takes me away on exciting tours through space, just as fairy stories charmed me fifty years ago.

After reading my first PLANET, which was the Fall number, I managed to secure in out-of-the-way and off-the-beaten-track news stands a copy of the Spring and one of the Summer, so now I have a large collection of four mags.

After I have become more familiar with the artists and authors I will write, panning them as every one else seems to love doing, especially the cover artists.

Sincerely yours,

NORA LOUGHERAN.

OPEN LETTER!

California, Pa.
225 Second St.

Dear Editor:

Please consider this an open letter to those fans, writers and illustrators here-below mentioned. In consideration of the fact that the Winter issue of PLANET was, as a whole, very well set up, I will make no further comment on the issue in general, but will try to offer criticism as per:

Mr. Joseph Farrell: *Mind Stealers of Pluto* was, in my opinion, just another of those Westerns done up in a Futurian cowboy suit. Fast adventure and nothing more. You can do better—you have done better.

Mr. Parkhurst: I'm one of those fellows who like a pretty girl on the cover of ANY magazine but she of this issue was away below your high standard. Held by the hairy arm of a "something-or-other" the look in her eyes was one of fascination. Was she observing a tight game of gin rummy?

W. S. Peacock: *Chimera World* was very well done. Keep up the good work in writing shorts and you may print one in each issue.

Mr. DePina: *Keeper of the Deathless Sleep* was one of your best.

Mr. Anderson: Your pic for the above story was as well done as the story itself.

Mr. Stewart Fleming: *Doorway*. . . A very nice little yarn. Its briefness cost you first place this ish. Anderson did a nice job on the illustration.

Mr. Whittington: The briefness of this yarn was its only asset. Anderson hadn't much to go on. His pic wasn't so hot.

Mr. Kiemle: Swell illustration on p. 63. (More of this fellow, Ed.)

Mr. Basil Wells: First place, Basil. *The Hairy Ones* was swell. Could fall for Altha myself. Potter did his Best on the pic (which I shall have on the wall of my den, I hope) illustrating this story. In fact this is one of his best to date. Pester WSP 'till he takes one yarn per issue from the old typer and at least one pic as well done as this from you, Potter.

Mr. Carter: *Colony of the Unfit* was swell-legant. Doolin outdid himself on the illustration. (No. 2 on my list.)

Mr. Bradbury: Phooey. The story was worse than the illustration. That's sayin' sompin, for Potter was way off the beam when he did this.

Mr. MacCreigh: Good, very good. *Double-cross* was one of the best shorts I have had the pleasure to read. Potter did fairly well on this one.

Mr. Joe Kennedy: Your poetry stinks.

Mr. E. Sigler: Yes, and I also want lesser and lesser of Lesser.

M. W. Stevens: More of the same. Not bad verse.

D. A. Currier: First vote for an original.

Damon Knight: Second to you, sir.

Barbara Jones: Third to you, Miss Jones. You write one of the finest letters yet to appear in *The Viz*.

W. Kermit Conway III: Are you three fellows still around?

And so until next issue, this is

V. R. HEINER,
signing off.

LATIN, ALWAYS LATIN!

Dear Editor:

So!!!! The Ed. likes Iowa!! Fine!! But the question involved concerned IOWANS, not IOWA!!!!!! Now to the rest of the Spring 1945 ish of PS:

Reading, as usual, from back to front, we find a letter from the hapless creator of a time machine. It is very amusing, although very confusing, to speculate on why anyone with a time machine should go gadding about in the past when the future indubitably holds infinitely more to interest anyone of scientific nature. By the by, why did the Ed. publish this letter, covering escapades in the past, in his futuristic mag??? Is it, as many of us have long suspected, that said Ed. is "Non compos mentis"? Or is it that he just can't read English????? Some of the stories he prints suggest both theories. But, cheer up, Ed.!!! "Non omnia possumus omnes." And ain't that the truth?? (We guess so—being nuts, we wouldn't know. Ed.)

In regard to time machines, my efforts along this line have been blocked by inability to obtain the necessary materials for experimental construction. Anyhow, my line is spaceships, not TM's. But apparently WPB considers both Space travel and Time travel as non essential!!! The dopes!!!! They are a bump in the road of progress!!!! Soon, when we are on our way to our favorite newsstands for a copy of our favorite STF murderzine, they will stop us to ask—"Is this trip really necessary?" Let's form a union, and protest on such inconsiderate treatment!!!!

But now back to time machines. Anybody have a good second-hand TM for sale? I have figured out a great use for a TM;—would go a week or two into the future. While there I would read the stock market tickers. Then come back to normal time, and play the stock market according to my advanced information. How could I lose with that system?? I make this public because I know all other STF fans are too honest to use a TM in such unethical pursuits!!! Ever consider how a TM would make a first hand study of History possible??? When I get one, I think I will go back to ancient Rome. See (or hear) what Caesar, Virgil, and Cicero really said. Does the Latin Class wish to accompany me??? And say, Ed., how about spending our next vacations together, in the year 29,653 A.D.? Or in ancient Rome?? We'd try to get along with the people better, and so perhaps would avoid embarrassing situations, such as encountered by Miss Beasley in her ill-fated expeditions into the dim and distant past. A great idea, eh?

Well, well. So the name is "Scott," is it?? On the first page of *Chimera World*, in the Winter ish, the author's name is given as Wilbur S., not W. Scott. How come? (Our nom-de-plume. Ed.) But perhaps if I had written *Chimera World* I'd probably be thinking of changing my name to something else—anything else!!!!

I wonder if I should take McDonald's crack about the first Spaceship being named "Star Gazing Suicides" in a personal way. If this crack was made in reference to a SSS, I am insulted. Could I stand it??? I say NO! Otherwise, R. McD. wrote a fine vindication of SF. I wish to state in rebuttal that the (my) first spaceship will not be called "Star Gazing Suicides." Was McDonald trying to scare the Ed. out of accepting my proposition in the Winter ish? If so, this

is sabotage! I demand an explanation. "Litera scripta manet!"

The century's choicest razzberry to F. J. Bethel!!!!!! Agreeing with Buchanon should be prohibited by law. But guess it isn't, and since the Ed. stopped the Buchanon fight in no uncertain terms, I suppose we must suffer in silence. Please, Ed., may I belatedly fire but one rocket blast at these jerks? (Shoot. Ed.)

Pet peeve Dept.—STF writers who insist on having instantaneous radio or television communication over interplanetary or even interstellar distances. This is pure nonsense, and scientifically impossible. It would take minutes for a radio message (or a telecast scene) to reach even the nearest of the planets, exact time varying according to what planet and its relative position in space, in respect to Earth. To the vicinity of the nearest star would take more than four years. Farther stars run into millions of years. Two way communication obviously take twice as long—there and back. Explanation: Hertizian waves travel with speed of light; the highest speed in the Universe. They cannot be made to go faster or slower. It is a fundamental speed that can't be changed by Space Bridger Units, etc.!! Wanna argue?? Spaceships that travel faster than light are so silly I shall not even comment on them. Having so said, I quickly retreat to my ray-proof fortification. (And you're a stfioneer. Ha. Ed.)

Today's questions: What exists beyond the curvature of Space-ether? Nothing? What?

LEWIS SHERLOCK,
Pres., Mgr., and Chief Engineer,
Sherlock's Super Spaceships, Inc.

ME!!!

Ceylon, India

Gentlemen (You too, Editor):

I find that the best part of your mag is "The Vizigraph"—that is until I ran across a letter (and a feud no less) of Mr. Buchanon's and some three or four fans (evidently, at the head of a long line) who were nibbling at his throat (really is the meat shortage that acute?) You allow such a goofy mess to go on in Viz without comment and I must ask why waste valuable paper (eh?) on an argument that you settled in the same issue on page 122, quote: "PLANET never has claimed to be science fiction"—and yet Mr. B. was poking fun at the teen age group because of their supposed ego and their lack of scientific knowledge. I am of the group that is neither scientist or of teen age, and yet we all pass the teens) and the s.f. angle is very interesting to me. Should I refrain from reading PLANET or should Mr. B. go elsewhere and discuss cyclotrons and all their relatives.

I have just mailed lovable Mr. B. 1000 packages—one containing TNT (Gee, I hope he don't read this first. But anyway he'll get jumpy about Christmas). As my buddy Mr. B. suggested I am egotistical as hell and nothing will do said ego and general well feeling as much good as 1—the liquidation of Mr. B., and 2—publication of this letter. In parting may I say that I enjoyed every word of this issue (Fall Vol. II, No. 8) and I would like to have seen *The Eyes of Thor* in a novel form—very good. And may Mr. B. strangle on his coffee some morning to find that as a substitute he has strychnine tea (and very strong I hope). I shall then rest much better and Viz. will be "fitten" to read. Thanks,

RALPH GAINES.

VIZI IS INANE!

44 Wyman Street
Chicopee, Mass.

Dear Mr. Peacock:

PLANET came out, and I bought it, quite some time ago. This is not, then, a letter of comment. It'd be much too late for that. But, I was re-reading your letter column, when I noticed that a few of your brighter readers are becoming cognizant of the fact that la Vizi is dying. It's taken them a long time to find that out. La Viz has been dying for the last 3 or 4 issues. There have been one or two bright spots—Buchanan's letter, for instance, which I, personally, got a big laugh out of. And damon knight's, in the current issue. But, honestly, Vizigraph is, to get in a plug for a prominent fanzine, a kept korpse. Furthermore, it's my theory that it's the very thing you seem to want more of—humor (or should I have said so-called humor?)—that's destroyed the very high opinion I once held for it. It seems that every one of your readers (writers would be more accurate) is trying to out-humor the others.

For a while, 'twasn't bad. But—one tires of the "... so I plunks down me two tithes of a buck, and, kicking the crutches from under a little, old lady, makes me way home wit' PLANET. Drool, drool..." type of letter. After one reads as many as we've had to in skimming through the Vizigraph. And your killing the Buchanan discussion gripes me, too. I had a lot of things I wanted to get off my chest, but your boycott kills any intention I had of doing so. The majority of your readers, Wilbur, are not born humorists—and to be a successful humorist, one has to be born one. I know, because I'm not one, and I've tried to write humor. Frankly, it stunk. Shaw, Tucker, knight, and a couple of others belong to the "born humorist" class. There are others who aren't as good, but who do succeed in being funny. The majority however, succeed only in sickening the reader. They imitate, they crack corny jokes, they write inane "humor". Not only that; confidentially. . . (Frank, you disappoint us. We like humor, yes; but we cannot control the imitative technique of the writers. Ed.)

Another gripe I have in regard to your statement, "Two double-spaced typewritten pages are the limit, for we'd like to print more of the letters..." and so forth. That ain't fair. I don't mean that I wouldn't be satisfied with only two typewritten pages—quite the contrary, I'd be perfectly satisfied. Except that some guys get more, really, than two typewritten pages in. I mean the guys with elite type can get more wordage into two pages than some poor gink like me who has pica type. Why don't you make some distinction between the two? (Quality of the letter might let down editorial bars. Compré? Ed.)

I don't like Mr. Sigler, tho I'm not angry with Buchanan. After all, I don't class myself with *your* (PLANET's and Vizigraph's) fans—I'm an *active-fan*, so there. And only a small percentage (well, anyway, not a majority) of your letter-writers are active-fans, so Buchanan couldn't accurately pass judgment on them.

Bests: damon knight, Andy Anderson, Bill Stoy.

In re your stories: I have a question I'd like to ask. In "*Lasarus* . . .", why didn't the hero toss the villyun to the Martians instead of playing martyr? (and kill the Carton angle? Nope. Ed.)

Your illustrations become increasingly poor. And inaccurate. Frinstancee, the guys on p 19

are supposed to be wearing space suits. That cut-in-half space-ship is actually funny. I laughed when I saw it. Well, there's one advantage to the poor illustrations—at least as far as I'm concerned, there is. You see, I no longer envy those fortunate folk who win illustrations. Poor things—I sort o' feel sorry for 'em.

Sincerely,

FRANK WILIMCZYK, JR.

PLAYRIGHT!

68 Madbury road
Durham, New Hamp.

Dear Mr. Peacock:

No doubt I am dropping in a little late in sending this letter but of course better late than never.

The thing about PLANET that always intrigues me is the cover. Now, I suppose you like those covers. You probably even think they help sell the mag. Tsk. Even then, things would not be so bad if we had Rozen or Gross but no we have Parkhurst. Tsk. It is with the thought of how Parkhurst must do his covers that inspires me to write the following play. Actors are Hero, Heroine, Monster, Artist, and last and least a fellow we will anonymously call Editor: Scene is with all characters present. The artist has green and purple paints and the Editor has a green eyeshade and carries blue pencils in his pockets and rejection slips in his brief case: Artist: Awright, awright lets get into position.

(Monster picks up heroine, suddenly, and she swallows her gum.)

Monster: How's dis?

Artist: No, no, no. Look fierce. Bristle your lips like you were going to snarl. Put some pep into it!

Monster: Grrrrr.

Artist: Alright, hero, pull out your gun and flex your biceps. (Hero accidentally pulls trigger and a cigarette pops out.)

Hero: Oh dear.

Artist: Awright, heroine, look terrified.

Editor: What story will this illustrate?

Artist: Who asked you?

(Artist starts slopping paint on all over the board and in the room.)

Artist: Hold still.

(Several hours later when Artist is through, Heroine is giggling, Monster looks bored and the Hero is having trouble holding the gun up.)

Artist: Wonder what the picture looks like?

Editor: Why not open your eyes now?

Artist (squeinting through his glasses): Well, whadaya know!

Everybody: Lets see.

(Heroine gets hysterical and strangles the Artist. Hero faints and falls out of the penthouse window. Monster pulls out a gun and shoots himself while the Editor runs out of the room screaming with the original tightly grasped in his hand.)

THE SAD END

Unfortunately, the Editor publishes the cover. I forwarded this manuscript to a playwright but he rejected it on the grounds that it used up too many actors every time; I have therefore sent it to you in the hopes that you could use it.

If you can't, send me one of the orange rejection slips, hand-lettered by Doolin.

Sincerely,

CYGNL

AUTHOR-CRITIC!

922 N. Courtland Ave.,
Kokomo, Ind.

Dear Peacock:

After reading my first yarn in print, I can easily see the various mistakes in it. For instance, I see that I neglected to explain that when the Martians pressed the buttons it put them in contact with the A.-D.T.-M.T. However, since the story was intended as satire, it doesn't make much difference. Just thought I'd beat the sharp-eyed fans to the punch.

Also, to those who rush from their dark retreats and shout "How could the Martians read the book title when the story distinctly said they were not on speaking terms with our language?" I will only point out there is a horrid little game the editor plays called "Cutting." The explanation went the way of the far-fung systems and super villains' cuss words. That too, however, is of little import. But like any new author, I am anxious to see that no one does mah baby wrong. (Solomon Peacock—Babies in half—half price. Ed.)

Oh, Mr. Peacock! A Paul illustration for my first contribution to P.S. I will now bestow a resounding kiss 'pon your rosy cheek. (Sir—I am a married man. Ed.)

A. Kinkade seems to have a grudge against a competitor pub. I am sad. Though I too am not particularly fond of yarns concerning this war, I am willing to forget and hope it doesn't happen again. I like to think of science-fiction mags as one big happy family, going forward together to greater things. So no more family squabbles, huh, fans? (Ha! Ed.)

A sweeping improvement has been wrought in PLANET by the addition of character cuts. The mag looks 100% better. I hope this is an indication of things to come. P.S. is stiff, literally. It doesn't open easily like other magazines. If this condition could be corrected, PLANET would take another big step forward. That's a small thing to harp about, but you know the saying, Peacock: 'When in Rome . . .' (Sure—fiddle, while the editor burns. Ed.)

Some readers cry out against authors constantly presenting them with the same old fare, but they do it in a jocular manner, which gives the writer the impression they don't mean a word of it, so he steps forward with more of the same. I have been reading PLANET for some three years, long enough to have formed a definite opinion of what I like and dislike. I have read many a yarn in the mag that failed to rouse me from my lethargy, but I was never so brazen as to trot out pen and paper and tell the author how the story *should* have been written. Words are their business. They know, usually from long experience, what the readers (and editors) want. Because a person has smelled of the bread in the oven, he is by no means qualified to inform the baker he is not using enough yeast in his loaves. If a reader must criticize, I think he will find an author will react more favorably to serious, constructive criticism than to acid comments of "it stinks." (Already I am drawing up my defense in preparation for the day when the vicious fans come snarling to taste of my blood.)

Although I haven't yet finished reading *Vandals of the Void*, it looks to be a great story, of the type that is all too rare these days.

One squawk that is justified is that re the

cover. For cripe's sake, Wilbur, (boy, that Cripe! Someone's always asking something for his sake) dig up a new frontispiece theme.

Well, 'darkness from whence I came' and all that sort of rot

Sincerely,

JAMES R. ADAMS.

TROUBLE IS—!

Hannibal, Missouri,
R. R. #1.

Dear Editor Peacock:

"Was the day before yesterday that I finally managed to purchase the Spring '45 issue of PLANET STORIES. Yes sir, those things are scarce around here. I consider myself lucky to be able to get P. S. at all.

On a day like today—with the wind howling and the snow blowing—I enjoy sitting by the fire and reading a *good* magazine. And I do mean *good*! P. S. is the best!

I've read P. S. for two years now and the Spring issue was the best issue I've ever gotten my hands on! But no wonder—just look at that lineup! Rocklynn, Brackett, DePina, Wilson, Etc. . . . That, my friend, cannot be beat except with the addition of BOND & CUMMINGS, and maybe Kuttner.

Now let's take a look at that cover, er—I mean another look! Again we have that unbeatable combination of hero, heroine, & hick! Keep 'em coming—with Parkhurst. He's plenty good for my money.

The inside pics were mostly all good. Except for the fact that I don't always like the type of outfit the young ladies wear. Something more appealing would be in order. Artists take note!

And now to the Vizigraph—The place to which many are called but few are chosen! I shall now quote you from Paragraph Two of the Vizigraph, Spring Issue, 1945. "Trouble is—too many of you let the other fellow write."

That sentence is what made me decide to write this, my first letter to The Vizi. So here I am—now we shall see what becomes of it. May I add that this won't be my last letter to the good old Vizigraph?

The three best letters in this last ish were those of Shawl, Dallas, and L. Beasley. Huckleberry pie! That gal (and, of, what a gall!) on the cover of the Winter '44 issue had been eating, or shall I say chewing? yes! This gal had been chewing on her clothes (!) To save you the trouble of asking me how I know, I'll just tell you. I was there! You see, I have in my possession a *Space-Time* machine, which permits me to travel to anyplace at any time, past, present, or future! So when that BEM was holding that gal over the wall I was the invisible, silent, onlooker.

This fellow Mason has a great ideal! That way all the letters can see print, and not just those that suit our Editor's taste. I'll be present to buy a copy every time this Vizigraph Supplement (or whatever you name it) is published. Let's get things rolling.

If Lewis Sherlock is still looking for volunteers—I'm one. Experience? Yes sir! Three rocket trips to Venus all by my lonesome! Proof? Have to go to Venus for that!

With that I'll be closing for this time.

Good luck!

Sincerely Yours,

GERALD MAHSMAN.

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